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The Coroner Held the Stakes

SCARLET STARLET DOUG WARREN

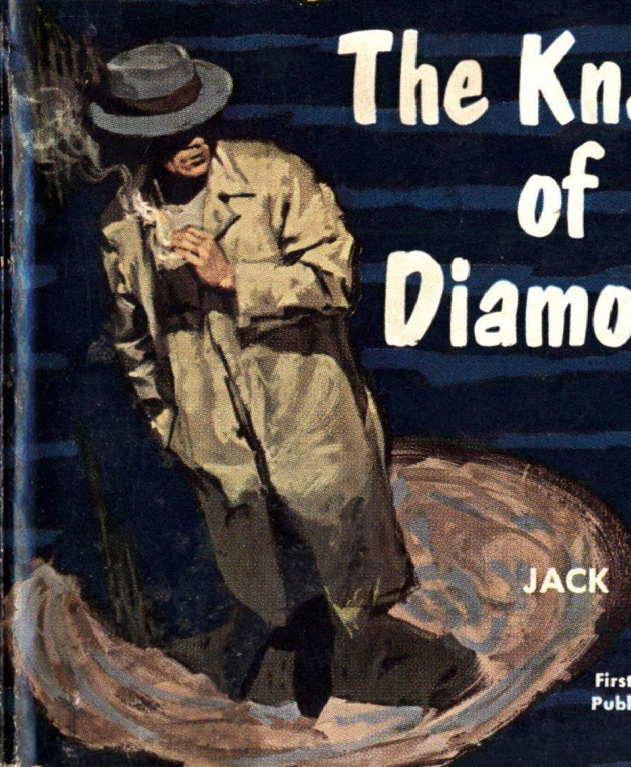
THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS KARNEY

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The Knave of Diamonds



JACK KARNEY

First Book
Publication

BET ON A FAST BULLET

An ex-gob with the tattoo of an arrow-pierced heart on the outside of his left wrist—this was the description of the heister who had made away with a mint of ice from the Donahue mansion. Jim Breen, insurance investigator, knew at once that the burglar had to be his old friend, Barney Malin, the bookie.

But when Jim set out to recover the rocks, he found out that the diamond theft somehow was meshed in with the organized gambling in town. He not only had to contend with his old buddy, but with a lot of murderous new playmates too—a bunch of tough gunsels whose only rule for play was that the roughest man wins . . . and the rest croak!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jim Breen

Big Jim wasn't necessarily smart, just clever.

Barney Malin

Hexed by a tattoo, this bookie couldn't win even when the race was fixed.

Marie Stanton

Hers was to pay, but not to owe.

Mrs. Donahue

Though she was quite wealthy, she was lacking in cash.

Rex Klinsky

The only thing he was afraid of was losing his bad reputation.

Frank Sanders

Never having any money didn't keep Frank from losing it.

The Knave of Diamonds

by

JACK KARNEY

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS

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SCARLET STARLET

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1.

CHERRY STREET was noisy, alive, full of kids with dirty faces and patched clothes playing tag around the garbage pile near the lamp post. The lamplight was dim, but on the streets you could see the dirt and filth a million washings couldn't dissolve.

There used to be violence on Cherry Street. Crime flourished there—petty larceny mostly. It was the work of the kids. The older lads preferred muggings and fights with knives and lead pipes, and gangs fighting gangs with anything a fist could grip, from clubs to zip-guns. Everything was homemade and showed variety and ingenious imagination.

Not all the kids were toughs, of course. Just a minority, really, but they got enough notoriety to give a black eye to everyone in the neighborhood.

I should know. I used to be one of them. Then I finally grew up and got a respectable job.

Surprisingly, most of the gang grew up to be solid citizens. Two strikes against them, yet they came through with a hit.

Even Barney Malin, our leader, who now ran a book, commanded respect from his neighbors and from the cops. Especially from the cops, who enjoyed watching a potential trouble maker turn into a respectable bookmaker who could pay his taxes to the precinct. Me, I got hooked up with Bender's Insurance Company. Five years as Stanley Bender's only red-headed investigator, and a lot of luck in an all-night crap game got me enough money to buy a junior partnership in Bender's company.

Barney Malin—my old pal. He'd be surprised to see me now. If this were last week, or last year, we could drink Scotch highballs while we talked of the old days and the times we got high together and tore a saloon apart, me with my hands, Barney with a bottle in each fist. We could talk our hearts out and Barney'd love that.

Now, however, our talk would be strictly business, and Barney might not like what I wanted to talk about. I needed information on a little job of robbery, and Barney was the boy who might help me, if that little tattoo on his left

wrist hadn't washed off. But if Barney wouldn't play ball, and if I still felt he was my man, I would have to bang the truth out of him. It wouldn't be our first slugging match either. But this time we wouldn't wind up shaking hands and going out for a drink. My life, practically, depended on Barney's co-operation, willing or otherwise. I'd cut a guy into little pieces to keep Bender's in black ink.

I had a good proposition for Barney, thirty thousand bucks for eighty grand of insured jewelry taken by the man who robbed our clients, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Donahue. Thirty big bills was more than the heister could get from a fence, and with Bender's Insurance Company it would be cash on the line, no questions asked.

Sure it wasn't a legitimate piece of business on the part of Bender's but we didn't have much choice, not if we wanted to stay in business. We could pay thirty grand and exist, or we would get tough and go looking for the hot ice and, if we didn't find it, declare bankruptcy. Me, I'm the gambling type, but Stanley Bender had other ideas.

The heist had taken place at three that same Saturday afternoon. At three-thirty it had been reported to Bender's. At four I'd been in the station house getting a list of the stuff reported stolen and a description of the lone bandit furnished by Mrs. Donahue's sister. At seven-thirty I was knocking on Barney Malin's apartment door on the eighth floor of a twenty-story modern apartment house right in the heart of the slums.

The girl who opened the door was a blonde doll in a blue beaded gown that had big pieces missing from the chest and shoulders. The slit down the front was a "U" instead of the normal "V" and the breasts were half moons bulging out of the cloth.

"Yes?" she said.

My eyes came up to her face, a tiny face warm with color. Amusement lurked around the edges of her full mouth, but the blue eyes weren't smiling at me. She was beautiful—here, in a dark room, or any place.

She said, "You could leave me some of my clothes."

I'd gotten down to the panties.

I said, "It's been so long since I saw a real live woman. I like the dress. Blue is your color."

"Thanks." She was getting annoyed. "The neighbors have their heads sticking out the doors. If you'll tell me what you're selling, I can slam the door in your face and go back to what I was doing."

I handed her my card. She read it, glanced up at me, and read it again. Tapping the card against a red thumbnail, she lifted questioning eyes.

"We don't need insurance." But she didn't slam the door in my face.

I said, "I'm looking for Barney Malin. This is his apartment according to the name plate downstairs." She nodded. I said, "Barney's a friend of mine. He and I used to swim off the same dock."

She was cute. "Will Barney recognize you without tights?"

"Who could afford tights in those days? We didn't mind showing off our belly buttons." She stepped back but when I tried to come in, she held the door against me. I said, "Do I get to see Barney or do we talk some more? Those neighbors are pretty nosy."

Her eyes shifted to the card, up to me, then slanted off. "Barney isn't here right now. If you'll leave a message, I'll talk it over with him and he can get in touch with you."

This time I pushed open the door and, before she could catch her breath, I was inside. I said, "Barney might get the same thrill if I gave him the message."

"You're pretty fresh," she said, eyes flashing.

I moved to the center of the room, where an evening newspaper lay open on the couch. It was a nicely furnished room, complete with fancy drapes and a big-screen television set in the corner. I unbuttoned my jacket and sat down on the couch. The newspaper headline was big and black. Mrs. Thomas Donahue, the victim, was juicy news.

I glanced down the column. The reporter had written the details as if he were very indignant about the whole thing.

Mrs. Thomas Donahue, the report said, wife of the president of Donahue & Co., textiles, had opened the door of her private house in answer to a knock. Her visitor, a masked

man, had shoved a shiny revolver into her chest and informed her she was the victim of a stick-up, and the less trouble she gave him the better his trigger finger would behave. Mrs. Donahue's sister-in-law, Mrs. Marie Stanton, widow of the late Anthony Stanton, had come down from her upstairs bedroom just in time to meet the intruder pushing his way into the house.

The man had come prepared with a roll of adhesive tape and some clothesline, which he used effectively to tie the women, after which he'd gone into the bedroom, to the right-hand drawer of the vanity. He confiscated Mrs. Donahue's boxful of jewelry and fled without an apology or a word of warning.

Mrs. Donahue, after fifteen minutes, had managed to free her hands. The cops were seeking an ex-gob with the tattoo of an arrow-pierced heart on the outside of his left wrist. The first clue had come from the knots, which, the police claimed, could have been made only by someone who had worked on a boat. The second clue had been supplied by Mrs. Stanton. The man's coat sleeve had hiked up while he'd been tying her up.

2.

THE BLONDE was getting impatient. She came close and stood over me. She smelled nice and sweet, the kind of smell that gives a guy funny ideas.

She said softly. "You can take the paper with you if you like. I'm through with it."

I relit my cigar, rolled it around my mouth, and chewed on it. I lifted my eyes to hers. She didn't meet my look.

I said, "Maybe Barney might like to read it. Quite a job they did on Mrs. Donahue." I looked at the picture of a matronly woman next to a mustached man. The pictures must have been taken years back. Don't ask me how I knew. That's the impression I got. "Barney might be interested in the description of the bandit. Big man with brown hair, brown eyes, a mole on his left breast. He's got big hands, the kind that can do tricks with a basketball. Also there's a tattoo of a heart on his left wrist."

She made a sucking sound with her lips and teeth. Her eyes opened wide, blue eyes full of questions. "There's no such description in the paper."

I held up the newspaper. "Read it again."

Her face twitched with sudden anger as she slapped it out of my hand. "Stop being so damned smart. There's nothing in that paper about brown hair and a mole and big hands. Who are you trying to hang?"

I shrugged, puffed smoke. "I'm not trying to hang anybody. Where's Barney? He and I can do business."

"Business?" Somehow I'd insulted her. "What sort of business? You know, mister-whatever-your-name-is—"

"Jim Breen. My friends call me Jim."

"What do you want with Barney?"

I dropped the cigar in the tray. "You got a quick mind. Maybe you could make a good guess."

"I haven't the faintest idea what this is all about."

Maybe she didn't. Maybe those bright eyes and quivering nostrils were a sign of passion.

I got up from the couch and stood straddle-legged. She just about reached my shoulder with the aid of her high heels. I couldn't really see them, but I knew she was the kind of dame that wouldn't be found dead in flat shoes. "Permit me to explain," I said. "Around three o'clock this afternoon, a Mrs. Donahue was robbed—"

"Oh, cut it out!" she cried. "Don't give me that routine. I just want to know why you're picking on Barney?"

"It fits, honey; the description fits Barney like a new hat, and you must know how Barney goes in for new hats. I remember once he owned ten and he didn't have a dime in his pocket."

"That description could fit a hundred men."

I couldn't resist running a finger down the side of her face. Her skin was smooth and soft and warm. She didn't move. Her eyes remained fixed on mine, her breath coming out unevenly.

I said, "Barney and I could straighten the whole thing out. The sooner you tell me where he is—" I stopped and looked over her shoulder toward the bedroom. "I'm gonna take a look."

She was stubborn. "You've got your nerve!" She moved quickly to block my way. "Barney isn't home and I'm not letting anybody snoop around."

I took her arms and lifted her to one side. "I got an idea Barney's in your workshop. I'm sorry if I'm assuming you live here; you kind of boss things."

She moved backwards towards the bedroom. "Yes, I live here, if it's any of your business. Anything else you want to know?"

I moved toward the bedroom.

Slow fear spread over her face, giving it a pinched look. "Who are you, mister? You're not Barney's friend. You're one of Klinsky's boys."

I said, "Let me introduce myself. Jim Breen, Bender's Insurance Company." The small talk was getting under my skin. Or maybe it was the beautiful body encased in cloth and beads. "You couldn't be Barney's wife?"

She displayed a pouting smile, forced and full of apprehension. "You know it's a good thing I'm not very sensitive. Barney and I are just very good friends."

I grabbed her wrist, pulled her toward me, then abruptly swung her away. She went head over heels onto the couch, the ripped gown up around her hips. She lay on the couch for a couple seconds while I stared. Reluctantly, I turned to go into the bedroom. She let out a cry.

"Barney! Barney!" She was on me again but she'd lost most of her fight in the clinches. I pinned her against the wall.

"Okay," I said. "Long as Barney is here, we can stop muzzling around. Will you go call him out? Or are you enjoying this too?"

For a second I thought she was working up a mouthful of saliva to shoot into my face. She opened her lips, but before she could say anything, something jammed into my back, something hard and big as a cannon.

A rough voice said, "Take your damn hands off Penny or I'll shove a slug up your big behind."

If that's what he was aiming for, the gun was a foot too high.

I said, "Quite a gal, Barney. You couldn't have done much better with a watchdog. Neither could I."

The gun came away from my back. He grabbed my shoulder, whirled me around. He was a big guy, four inches better than my six feet, and he looked even bigger wearing nothing but a pair of fancy red-and-white shorts. His whole chest was nothing but hair. No skin was visible. Even the mole on his left side was invisible.

His gun hand dropped. "Jim! Jim Breen. What the hell!" He said to Penny. "What goes on? Look at you!"

There was a mixture of anger and relief on her face. "This gorilla tried to bust in on you. I thought it was one of Klinsky's boys. We made enough noise to wake a stiff but when you sleep, you sleep."

"This guy is a friend of mine."

"You've got so many friends, we should keep a file—pictures and fingerprints, and stuff."

Barney gave me a look. "If you wasn't my friend, you'd be in a lot of trouble right now." He turned on her. "Get dressed before Jim gets the wrong impression on what business I'm in."

She cried, "You and your filthy mouth."

"Get dressed and never mind about my mouth."

She stamped her foot. "Don't yell at me like that! I wish he was Klinsky. I wish I hadn't tried to stop him. I wish he'd killed you in your sleep." She wheeled and went out of the room.

Barney shook his head sadly. He flipped the revolver onto the couch and scratched his tousled head.

"Dames are funny people." His eyes softened. "She's a good kid. Never had anybody quite like her. What brings you here, Jim? It's been such a long time since I saw you last."

I picked the newspaper off the floor, looked at the black headlines, and moved my eyes around to his. His glance was quiet and level. He got a cigarette from the table, lit it, sucked in a lot of smoke, and let it out quickly. I got my cigar from the tray and ran my nail across a match. Over the fire, I watched him. He wore a worried look but his manner was calm, controlled.

He said, "You gonna tell me why you came here, Jim?"

I pointed to the headline. "A little case of robbery."

He stared blankly. "Stop being so damn mysterious and

tell me what you want with me."

I puffed smoke. "Bender's Insurance Company is stuck for the insurance on the Donahue swag. Eighty thousand bucks! Maybe a guy could get twenty thousand from a fence. Probably less. We'll hand over thirty big ones for the loot."

A cloud of smoke shot out of his mouth. "Why tell it to me?"

"I figured you could help me get the hot ice and maybe earn yourself a commission."

He killed his cigarette in the tray. "Cut the crap, Jim. You got ideas readin' that description in the newspapers. That heart tattoo gave your brain a whirl."

"The description fits you to a 'T'!"

A flicker of uneasiness passed over his face. "Lots of guys have tattoos of hearts with arrows. Lots of guys are big and tie sailor knots. Jim, I got a fair bookie business. I make a buck. Heisting is not in my line."

I dropped my cigar into the tray. "The bookie business isn't so hot these days. The new Federal tax is murdering the books. Paying the money is as good as a confession to the city cops. Not paying the money is as good as a bit in a Fed pen. You guys really have your troubles, and they'll keep getting worse."

He spat on the carpeted floor. "This for the Feds! Christ, Jim, you know I do business on the phone. I don't hang around corners where they can grab me."

Maybe I was batting my head against a steel wall. Barney was a bookie; he never had gone in for the rougher way of making a living. At least as far as I knew . . .

I said, "This description is *too* good."

"Right. It fits a thousand guys."

"It wouldn't take long for Mrs. Donahue and her sister-in-law to identify the heister if they got a look at him."

He was disgusted with me. "Stop being a kid, Jim. The guy wore a mask. The paper says so. Sure they might pick me out, but they'd be going by size. Line up six guys built like me, masks on their faces, and they'd have trouble picking out anybody."

Penny came into the room. She wore a blue gown, one of those fluffy things with frills. Her breasts must have caught

cold, what with all that exposure, for now she had them so well covered I could barely see a piece of neck.

She reached for a cigarette. "It's eight o'clock, Barney, and you're still walking around without pants."

He looked at me. "Me and Penny's got a date. It's been nice talkin' to you. Come again, Jim, huh? We'll talk about the old days and kill a couple of quarts of Scotch. And, Jim," he hesitated a split second, "you've got the wrong guy. See him out the door, Penny."

She snapped. "I'd rather see him out the window."

Barney went into the bedroom. I followed him. It was a fair-sized room, a full seven-piece, shiny walnut set, plus a couple of torch lamps. I picked the blanket off the floor and dropped it onto the bed. He watched every move I made. I sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress was soft.

I said, "Thirty thousand dollars, Barney, and no questions asked. Once the cops get their mitts on the jewelry, you don't get a red nickel."

"You don't mind if I wash while listening to this garbage, Jim? It is garbage, you know. I haven't got any jewelry. I never stole any jewelry. I wouldn't know who did. Until I read that paper I never heard of Mrs. Donahue or Mrs. Stanton. You wanna join me?"

He went in the washroom and I was three feet behind him. Nobody spoke while he turned on the water and let it run on a cake of soap he'd taken out of the rubber tray. He washed and dried himself with a thick Turkish towel. He found a comb in the medicine cabinet and quickly combed his hair.

"Jim, listen to me." A note of pleading crept into his voice. "If I did the job, you think I wouldn't do business with you? Thirty grand is nice money. What the hell could I lose? You'd never turn me in; I'd have the hot ice off my hands and a lot of folding money to piss away. If I had the stuff, I'd give it to you in a minute. Doesn't that make sense?"

He'd made a good point.

I said, "Maybe they're out of your hands now, Barney. Maybe the fence has the stuff. It's worth a couple bucks to find out who's got the jewelry so I can talk to him."

He gave me a hard look as he went past me into the bedroom. He reached for a shirt on the back of a chair. "You're way off, Jim."

"We're back to the garbage again," I said. "You know people, Barney. Maybe you could find out who did the job. I'm paying thirty grand and I'm not particular who turns in the stuff."

He laughed. "That sounds funny. You once told me your job is on the respectable side."

I raised a shoulder in a shrug. "I work for a living, Barney. Sure there's a lot of legal prostitution in the job, but that senior partner I got runs things. And if it's his idea for me to rub bellies with a lot of crooks, I'll rub bellies."

He slipped on his pants, then I helped him get into his double-breasted tuxedo jacket. He smiled at me and said nothing. He took my arm and steered me into the living room where Penny was pacing the room, cigarette smoke coming out of her mouth and nostrils.

"So long, Jim," Barney said. He was smug, too smug and complacent. It bothered me. "If I hear anything, I'll give you a ring. Where you staying?"

"You can find me in the phone book. I got my car parked around the corner. I could give you a lift."

Penny wasn't in a good mood. "Taxis are still running."

Barney grunted something, his words lost in the clothes closet. He came out with a gray soft felt hat and a black cloth coat which he dropped on the couch. I picked up the coat, held it open for Penny. She hesitated a second then backed into it. She'd no sooner got her arms through the sleeves when she stepped away from me like I had some contagious disease.

I laughed. "C'mon, I'll give you a lift. The cool night air sometimes does wonders to a lousy disposition."

"Sure," Barney said, winking. "We can use a lift. Why walk four blocks for a cab?"

"Okay," she agreed grudgingly. "Only, Barney, you sit between us. That's as close as I'll ever get to this mug."

I laughed and opened the door for them. Barney, always the gentleman, went out first. As she passed me, I whispered, "You never can tell, doll. We could get friendly enough to

hold hands."

She whirled to say something, but just then a woman opened the door and came out of the apartment across the hall. Tightening her coat around her, Penny headed for the elevator as if she were running from a plague.

3.

MY BUICK SEDAN was still intact at the curb. Nothing was missing as far as I could see. I shoved off a couple kids playing cards on the car roof.

"Times haven't changed, Barney," I said.

I was talking to myself. About ten feet to the right of me, Barney and Penny were talking to two men, hands in pockets. Typical hoods. One was a tall thin man with a twitch in his left shoulder. His face was pale in the dim light, eyes bright. The other man was short and chunky. He had a powerful physique, the kind that says wrestler. His face told a different story. The nose was a flat blob, and there was heavy scar tissue above the eyes. He was or must have once been a fighter, but not a very good one judging by a face that had absorbed a lot of punishment.

"The hell with Klinsky," Penny's voice was high.

Barney shoved her. "Let me handle this. It's my head, not yours. Look, fellers, I told Rex I'd have three grand—"

The tall man's shoulder jerked and Barney went back a step from a slap across the face. "That's for nothing." He had a smooth, womanish voice. "Keep arguing and you'll really get something. The boss says bring you now. N-O-W."

I wondered what had happened to Barney. In the old days, that slap would have got the hood a shoe right between the legs, gun or no. Barney had softened up, or maybe the recklessness was gone.

I moved closer and stood between Penny and Barney. The hoods exchanged glances. I crossed my hands over my chest and waited. Marty scowled, his pigeon chest coming up as he took a breath. He wasn't a strong guy. A good breeze could bend him in half. But that big cannon bulging in the jacket against his left shoulder, commanded respect. The other man moved up on his toes and rocked. He didn't need

a gun, not if he could land with those big fists he kept opening and closing at his sides. He wanted action. Nothing else could cool that hot gleam in his black eyes.

Marty jerked a thumb in my direction. "What's this?"

Barney looked disturbed. "Go away, Jim. This is none of your business."

I smacked my lips. "Make believe I'm some place else."

The thin man said to his partner, "Puggy, you're a magician; make the mug disappear."

Puggy's eyes came around slowly. "You heard what Marty said. Cop a walk, dummy, before I count three."

It seemed Klinsky hired only educated hoods.

I examined my fingernails.

Barney's voice was hoarse. "Jim, be a nice guy. Tomorrow come around and we'll talk about old times. Now, you gotta let me alone. You're screwin' me up."

Penny's lips curled. "We don't need you, strong man. Honest we don't. Please go away, far away."

I gave up. "If you insist. I'll be in my car in case you need transportation. So long, Puggy, Marty. Remind me sometime I owe you boys something."

Marty looked puzzled. "You don't owe us a thing, pal."

Puggy took Barney's arm. "Let's go, Malin."

Penny turned to follow them but Marty waved a finger in her face. "We got no room in our car for you; it's a three-seater."

She pushed his hand aside. "I'm going with Barney."

She tried to go past Marty but he grabbed her arms and yanked her back. She tripped over her own feet and sat down hard. A funny grunt came out of her mouth. Marty laughed and started to walk away.

I said, "The least you can do is pick the lady up."

Marty looked me up and down. "Pick her up yourself."

I leaned over to help Penny up. Fire in her eye, she shrugged me off. "Go drop dead some place." She pushed herself off the ground and ran after the hoods, catching up to them just as a protesting Barney was being forced into a Packard convertible. She grabbed Puggy's jacket before he could disappear into the car.

"I'm going with Barney," she cried, hysteria in her voice. "Please!"

Marty looked disgusted as he lifted his hand to slam it across the back of her neck. I grabbed his arm. I told him, "Once was enough."

He gave me a scornful look, turned, placed the palm of his hand against Penny's face and pushed hard. She went back, almost going down. Laughing, he turned to get into the car. My foot itched worse than ever. I took his arm, squeezing the flabby muscle.

"I got something for you, Marty."

Angrily he reached under his jacket. "Don't paw me."

I hooked my left fist into his belly. He gasped and doubled over just in time for his face to meet my knee coming up. He cried out as he fell forward, hitting the sidewalk with a dull thud. He rolled over on his back, both hands clutching his nose, from which a lot of claret was spilling out and running down his chin to stain his nice clean canary-yellow shirt and plaid tie.

Puggy slid out of the car, his gun in his fist—a big black gun. He was cool, eyes shining happily.

"You shouldn'ta done that."

I lifted my shoulders. "That's what I owed him; I pay my debts."

"You and me both, brother. Where would you like the slug?"

I said, "Up your can."

The smile disappeared as he swore at me, then moved close. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Marty coming up, his whole front smeared with big red streaks.

Puggy said, "I'd give it to you right in the belly, only Marty'll get sore on account of he'll wanna do it hisself."

Cursing, he crossed his left fist, aiming for my face. This time I rolled completely under the arm and rammed my right hand into his gut. He grunted. I slammed my left against his ear. The gun dropped to the pavement. I let loose a bombardment of lefts and rights. He stood against the car, his face changing color from swarthy to a bright red. His eyes rolled and his body began to quiver as he fell forward.

I didn't try to catch him. He wasn't worth the effort. He hit the ground like a wet sack of flour. Penny cried out something. I turned just in time. Marty, on wobbly legs, was coming towards me, his hand fumbling inside his jacket. I lashed out with my foot. The skin on his face twitched. He clutched his groin and fell over Puggy. He moaned and became sick on his partner's face.

The fisticuffs had taken one minute, and enough time for a mob to get on the scene: kids, grownups, male *and* female, eyes gleaming with excitement. Over their heads I could see the cop on the beat heading for us. He was in no hurry. I'd never seen a cop who was anxious to get to a trouble spot. If this cop was lucky, he'd arrive after we'd gone and the crowd had dispersed.

Barney had come out of the car. He stood there paralyzed, a sickness in his eyes.

"Jim, what you done?" he cried. "You trying to get me killed?"

I took his arm and in a couple seconds he reached my car, Penny a step behind us. I had to shove him inside. He kept looking back at the hoods staggering to their feet. Penny got inside. She was quiet, no wisecracks, her breath coming out as if she had asthma. With her lungs, though, it just couldn't be possible. I got behind the wheel.

Barney moaned as we pulled away from the curb. I hollered for him to cut it out.

He was on the verge of tears. "You shoulda stayed out of it."

I said, "Klinsky can't be that tough."

His cheek muscles did a dance. "That's what you think."

Penny said, "Tough guy Klinsky. With a dozen lousy gunmen at his beck and call, why shouldn't he be tough?"

"Barney," I said. "Maybe I could talk to Klinsky and straighten this mess out."

Barney's chin came off his chest, wary eyes came around to me. "You must have something else on your mind."

"I could use a tip on that jewelry."

He laughed harshly. "If I had the jewelry, wouldn't I turn it over to you for thirty grand? With thirty grand in my kick I could straighten out anything with Klinsky. Would I sit

here and wonder what Klinsky's gonna do next if I could spit in his eyes? For thirty thousand dollars, believe me, I could spit *twice* in his eyes and he'd smile. Klinsky has a god; his name is money."

I said, "Barney, how much you owe Klinsky?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, "not a dime."

"If there's anything I can do to help . . ."

Penny's head shot up. "You wouldn't have a couple of thousand dollars laying around the house?"

Barney turned on her. "Why don't you shut up? This any of his business?"

"No," she said coolly. "But he offered to help, and I just called his bluff."

"I can get it," I said.

"I know, I know," she said, "All Barney has to do is bring you the Donahue baubles."

"Just a tip."

Barney cried, "Let me out of here. For God's sake, I'm choking. Jim, you're a stubborn bastard. That's all I gotta say. Let us get the hell out of here. I can still afford a cab where I can breathe in peace."

I pulled over to the curb. "Think about it, Barney. Just a tip you might pick up in your wanderings."

"You're cracked all right."

I was beginning to think so.

Penny got out and patted her coat to get out the wrinkles. Barney grunted as he stepped onto the curb. I watched him fumble for a cigar. Cellophane and all, he jammed it into his mouth and chewed. Realizing, he yanked the cigar out and flung it into the gutter. He searched my eyes.

I said, "Only you and I know the guy who can make pretty sailor knots and who sports a funny heart on his left wrist. You and I, Barney, and Penny too."

He hurled two obscenities in my direction and hurried away, Penny holding onto his arm.

4.

A CURVING asphalt road, glistening white in the darkness, led to the Donahue residence, a two-story solid house made of

red brick and flagstone. I got out of the car and crossed the cool green lawn to the brass knocker on the door under the portico roof. It was quiet in this part of Brooklyn.

I lifted the circle of brass high and let it drop. It came down slowly, as if regulated by a hidden spring, and kissed the wood door. There was no sound of movement from inside the house, nothing but that same eerie stillness.

I rubbed my hands together and looked across an acre of field up to where a quarter-moon grabbed a black cloud and pulled it quickly around it like a black shroud. I reached for the knocker again. The door opened on a chain, and a pair of dark, restless eyes looked out at me. I took out a card and stuck it toward whoever was playing peek-a-boo with me. A white, thin hand took the card and disappeared behind the door, which closed softly. In a few minutes the door opened again.

"I'm sorry," a tight, thin voice said. "Mrs. Donahue is not at home. I'm Mrs. Stanton, Mr. Donahue's sister."

"I could talk to you until Mrs. Donahue returns. I hope she'll be back soon."

"I don't know." She stopped, and I didn't know what part of my question the answer covered.

I said, "It's a little difficult trying to hold a conversation from out here."

The door closed again and I was beginning to wonder when I heard the chain being unhooked. The door opened wide and I walked into the house.

The living room was a big stadium stuffed with big, comfortable chairs. The drapes were long and expensive-looking, the furniture a shiny mahogany.

"Do you mind?" I asked, showing her my cigar.

She shook her head, so I lit up and puffed some smoke while I looked her over. Mrs. Marie Stanton wasn't a beautiful woman, but those deep black eyes in the olive skin were alive with promises. She looked like a pushover, the kind you take into a bedroom by the hand.

She had straight black hair, cut in inch-long bangs over the smooth forehead. She wore an apron over a pink slip.

She said abruptly, "Perhaps we could get on with the questioning. I assume this is necessary despite the fact that

I've repeated the story at least a dozen times to the police. Surely you must have spoken to them."

I studied my cigar. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get the details from you. I don't like hearsay testimony."

Slowly, with some show of tolerance, she went over the story, a tiny smile on her thin lips. Maybe there was something funny about me. I don't know. I didn't even care. Those black eyes were full of moonlight, and I liked the way they roamed over my broken-down face.

I learned that the masked man who had done the job was big, with rough hands that bruised her tender thigh when he ran the ropes around her body. The heart tattoo on his left wrist had an arrow running from left to right, with no word or name to mar its fading beauty.

"It was a small blue heart but the arrow was red. It struck me as odd—a *blue* heart."

I said, "You must have been very frightened."

She thought that over for a while, then shook her head. "I don't believe I was until after he'd gone."

"Usually a frightened person will not remember details during a harrowing experience. Sometimes, they get into such a state of shock, they can't tell you the color of the assailant's clothes. What happened after he tied you and Mrs. Donahue?"

He'd left the two women in the living room and had gone to Mrs. Donahue's bedroom. In a few moments he'd come out with the box of jewels. He'd come prepared with a paper bag, into which he had shoved the box. He'd folded the brown paper neatly around the red, plush-topped box and had gone out of the house without a word.

"He never spoke to you?"

"Only when I came down the stairs. I'd been in my room, having just returned from my weekly dentist appointment. He moved the ugly-looking revolver in my direction and said, as I stopped halfway down the stairs, 'Keep comin', lady. Don't stop. C'mon, nobody's gonna hurt you.'" She laughed softly as she mimicked the heister, "So I kept comin'."

"After he tied you, he went directly to the bedroom?"

"Yes. The whole episode from the time I came downstairs took five minutes, if I'm a competent judge."

"At no time did you see an accomplice?"

She looked up at the ceiling, then down at the floor. "He was alone."

"How do you know? He could have had somebody outside, somebody in a car."

That smile and those eyes caressing my face were making me sleepy. Or maybe I was tired. As if admonishing a naughty child, she said, "Of course, he might have had a dozen accomplices outside but I saw none and I heard no car. Forgive me if I sound stupid. I realize it isn't likely a man would burglarize a house and not be prepared with a means of fleeing the scene." Then she thought of something. "Someone could have been waiting in a car around the bend on the asphalt road. I don't believe the sound of a car motor would have reached our ears from way out there."

Maybe she was right. The way I figured it, the dropping of a pin around that same bend would have sounded like a brass gong calling the road gang for supper. But, I figured, I had to be wrong on this. The heister must have used some means of transportation in his getaway, unless he walked a half-mile to the main road or used a bicycle.

She said sweetly, "If I'd known the point was important I would have gone to the window and looked out when he left; that is, if my arms and legs hadn't been tied."

She was cuter than I'd thought.

I said, "Mr. Donahue home?"

"No. My brother is due back today from Los Angeles. As for Sandra, the maid—I'm anticipating your next question—this is Sandra's day off. We expect her back sometime this evening."

There was a noise at the door as it opened. "Marie?" a soft, cool voice said from around the foyer bend. "Where are you, Marie?"

Marie got up and excused herself. I put my dead cigar into the ash tray, tapped the arm of my club chair a couple times, then pushed myself up to go look out the French doors. The piece of moon was out again bathing the garden in pale light. It was a beautiful garden, I know, even if it was hard to distinguish colors in the semidarkness,

"Do you like our view, Mr. Breen?" Clear gray eyes smiled

at me. Mrs. Donahue had a high, smooth forehead, the brown hair pushed behind the tiny ears. The lines of her jaw sloped sharply down to the softly rounded chin. Mrs. Donahue was probably around forty, but she could have dropped ten years from her birth certificate and nobody'd argue the point.

She held my card in her left hand, the right hand fumbling with a buckle on her silk print dress.

I said, "I could spend a day or two in that garden just fooling around those flowers."

Mrs. Stanton came into the room, a tiny hat on her head, a silver fox stole draped loosely around her shoulders. She finished pulling on the gray gloves before she spoke.

"Good night, Mr. Breen. If I've left any questions unanswered, my sister-in-law will fill in the voids. You must forgive me. I've got a date." She smiled. "And he gets very excited when I'm late. See you later, Eva."

I said good night and watched her go. I heard the door close softly and brought my attention back to Mrs. Donahue.

I said, "I would have preferred Mrs. Stanton's presence when I questioned you, just in case she remembered some more details. Sometimes a remark, a word even, will bring back a forgotten detail."

Mrs. Donahue had a nice smile. "Mrs. Stanton lives here. You're welcome to return at any time to finish your investigation. We'll be home tomorrow evening, Mr. Breen, and we'll tell you whatever you wish to know. Good night, Mr. Breen."

That was a nice delicate send-off, subtle as a kick in the belly. That smile was the only thing that kept me from saying something that she could take as an insult.

I said, "You wouldn't be expecting somebody?"

She nodded. "Just Mr. Donahue. He's due any moment." She joined me at the windows. She smelled as if she had an armful of assorted flowers. "You know it's amazing how quickly you people get on the job."

"We try to be prompt. A selfish motive. We've solved cases because we didn't wait until the clues became too cold to be usable." I took a paper from inside my jacket. "Mrs. Donahue, would you mind checking this list of stolen items you reported to the police? Just in case those cops made a mistake. I'd like Mr. Donahue to check, too. I understand

he's been out around Los Angeles."

"Three months, two days. A business trip. Mr. Donahue returned today. Mrs. Stanton just informed me my husband called from the airport while I was out shopping. I expect him in a little while."

"Then Mr. Donahue doesn't know about the robbery?"

Her face lengthened and became taut. "He'll learn the details soon enough. Poor Tom." There was a wistful, faraway look in her eyes. "I wish he were here." She blinked her eyes and smiled. Then, as if confiding a great secret to me, "It will take at least an hour to convince him I was not physically harmed. You know how some men are."

I said, "Rape is a nasty word."

Her cheeks grew warm. "That horrid man!"

She realized she was holding my sheet of paper listing the stolen jewelry. "Oh, I'd better look this over. Now, where did I leave my handbag . . . ? Excuse me, Mr. Breen." She went through the foyer, disappeared from view for a few seconds, then returned with a suede, bone-handled bag. She set it on the end table, flipped it open and fished out a pair of eyeglasses.

I heard a funny kind of sound. I turned quickly. Mrs. Donahue was staring down at the table. Her mouth was open, surprise and dismay etched on her face. I was wondering what was bothering her when she suddenly picked up my cigar, held it as if she had a repulsive snake in her hand, and looked around for a place to throw it. I opened my lips to tell her I'd take it off her hands. Some women are nutty about smoke and ashes and dead cigars that can stink up a room. Mrs. Donahue, I figured, was just a little screwier than the rest. Looking down at the cigar in her hand her face seemed to be changing color, as if the cigar smell was making her nauseous.

She dropped the cigar into her handbag and closed the lid with a snap that sounded loud in the quiet of the room. Then she remembered the list which had dropped to the floor in her excitement.

"The list is correct, Mr. Breen." The smile was back and the excitement of the moment had passed.

I came away from the window. "Tomorrow," I said, "I'll

check the photographs against the list. Later, when and if I come across one of the pieces, I can recognize it. Just a few questions, Mrs. Donahue . . .”

“Tomorrow, Mr. Breen. I have a terrible headache.”

“It won’t take long. Tell me about the bandit—whatever you can remember. He was a big man and wore a mask. Go on from there.”

Her story didn’t vary one fact from that of her sister-in-law, except that Mrs. Donahue hadn’t seen the tattoo marks. I worked on the accomplice angle.

She frowned. “It seems to me if he had an accomplice, he would have come inside and helped him.”

“Unless,” I said, “the accomplice didn’t want to be seen, even with a mask. You or Mrs. Stanton might have recognized him by some word or familiar movement.”

“I don’t understand.”

She wasn’t that stupid. I said, “Somebody you know could have fingered this job for the masked bandit, somebody who knew the layout of the house. In plain English, a friend of yours could have informed the heister how to get your jewelry with the least amount of motion. Friends have been known to do that, especially for a big piece of change.”

“I don’t believe that.” The headache evidently was forgotten. “My friends are above reproach.”

“How about Mrs. Stanton?”

She gasped angrily. “Marie had nothing to do with this mess.”

I shrugged. “*Somebody* tipped off the bandit as to where you keep the family baubles. According to your story, corroborated by Mrs. Stanton, the man tied you both securely, then immediately headed for the bedroom. Somebody must have briefed him, somebody who knew you well enough to know the exact layout of the rooms and the hiding place of your jewelry.”

“The jewels were in a red plush box in the right hand drawer of my vanity. That can’t be such a difficult hiding place to find.”

“No safe?”

“We usually kept the jewelry in Mr. Donahue’s office vault. The last time I used them was at a party the night

before Mr. Donahue left on his trip." She shook her head sadly, smiled. "I'm still waiting for Mr. Donahue to take the jewelry back to his office vault."

"How about your maid? She above reproach, too?"

Firmly, "Of course. Sandra's been with us seven years. We love her as if she were one of the family. She feels the same about us, I know. I'm afraid you're going in the wrong direction."

"How many people knew where you kept the trinkets?"

"Sandra, Mr. Donahue, Mrs. Stanton and I."

"With Mr. Donahue in California and you vouching for the maid's honesty, that leaves you and Mrs. Stanton."

She ran long fingers over her face in a tired gesture. "I'm afraid I'm not in the mood to make much sense out of what you say. Anyway, not tonight. I suppose it's the excitement of waiting for Mr. Donahue to come home. Forgive me, Mr. Breen."

I laughed. "It isn't that easy, Mrs. Donahue. I'm convinced there was a robbery in this house. I'm also convinced that the man who did the job had some excellent coaching. *You* could have given him that coaching, or Mrs. Stanton, or your maid, or Mr. Donahue even if he is in California. Or, he could have been somebody who knew exactly where the jewels were kept, and who got himself a partner to do the actual dirty work while he waited outside in a car, at a safe distance, to ride his confederate out of the danger zone."

She shook her head. "I can't think of anyone, Mr. Breen, who knew me well enough to know the jewelry was in that drawer instead of in Mr. Donahue's vault."

I stared at her for a long minute. Her eyes did not waver. For a few seconds they had a look of defiance, or maybe it was stubbornness, then it was gone. I lowered my eyes first.

"Think hard," I said softly. "A good friend of the family, or somebody who's not exactly a friend of the family but whom you know personally. I mean *you*, Mrs. Donahue, not the maid, not your sister-in-law."

A red spot glowed on each cheek. The defiant look was back, in spades. "Please be more explicit, Mr. Breen. There is something vile working in your mind, isn't there? I can tell by that lascivious sneer on your face."

"To put it bluntly, Mrs. Donahue, I was thinking of some male who'd been visiting you occasionally, or frequently, while your husband was in California."

She drew her mouth down tightly. Tiny fists clenched at her side, she cried, "You are insulting, Mr. Breen. I wish you'd go. Good night, sir."

She turned to walk me to the door. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," I said, "but we've got to cover all angles. As far as I'm concerned, as of now that's the best angle: a boy friend, *your* boy friend, a cutie who learned what was doing in your bedroom and took full advantage of his knowledge."

She whirled. Her hand came around, fist clenched. I caught it, and for a second we were so close she could have taken a bite of my tie.

"Before I go, Mrs. Donahue, could I have my cigar back? It's my last one, otherwise I'd let you smoke it."

All the color drained out of her face. "Cigar?"

"The one you put into your handbag; it belongs to me."

She backed away and stood staring at nothing. Mechanically, she went to her handbag and opened it.

Handing me my cigar, she said, "Now will you please go."

I slipped the cigar into my mouth, took it out. The tip had dried up and tasted bitter. "Mrs. Donahue, you could save me a lot of time and effort if you'd tell me who's your cigar-smoking friend? It will be our secret, yours and mine."

A blue vein in her neck throbbed. "I don't know what you are trying to imply."

I walked to the ash tray and laid the cigar in it. I said, "Just a harmless chunk of tobacco, but you grabbed it up and hid it as if it were a stick of opium which your husband might find when he came home. You thought your cigar-smoking friend had come in while you were out and left his cigar. You could have been afraid I might be nosy enough to ask what a cigar was doing in your tray if your husband hadn't returned, as you said, from Los Angeles. Or maybe you were afraid Mr. Donahue, due any minute, as you also said, might come home, see the cigar and know that his wife had a certain party for company. You ducked the cigar, and

I'm nosy. Who was the man, Mrs. Donahue?"

She cried, "My private life has nothing to do with this robbery."

The door opened. "Eva?"

A tall man with gray hair came into the room. His teeth were glistening white, strong and even, the kind movie actors use for their close-up scenes. He dropped his luggage at his feet, held out his arms, and, as if all the cares had dropped from her shoulders, Mrs. Donahue's face beamed as she slid into them.

They kissed and she said, "I didn't expect you so early."

"I made good plane connections."

I said, "I never could ride in a plane. Grabs me right here." I touched my belly.

He looked at me as if first realizing a stranger was in the room.

Mrs. Donahue introduced me and in a quick summary gave him an accounting as to what had happened to the family jewels.

"Horrible," he said twice during her monologue and when she'd finished, he kissed her cheek. "You're all right, darling?"

The loss of the jewelry didn't seem to bother him nearly as much as his wife's welfare, which made me glow inside.

I said, "She's okay. But I don't feel so good. You see my firm stands to lose an arm and a leg."

He wasn't interested. "I hope you catch that robber. If you'll excuse me, Mr. Breen."

He waited for my answer. Mrs. Donahue stared at me, probably wondering if I were going to bring up the subject of that cigar again. It was quiet in the house. Somewhere, miles away it seemed, the church bells began to play a tune. After a while they stopped and, except for the buzz of a fly against the window pane, it was quiet again.

I blew smoke. "Sure, Mr. Donahue. I'll be around again most likely. Good night."

I went outside wondering about Mrs. Donahue's lover-boy.

She could be absolutely right that her love affair had nothing to do with the heist job. And she could be all wrong. This wouldn't be the first case in which a smart guy

used a society woman to take him places which eventually were burglarized. In this case lover-boy would just have to know two things: when the jewels were available and where they were kept.

I stood on the curb a few minutes. It was nine forty-five, and time, as they say in books, was of the essence. Hell, I had to get those trinkets before they got into the hands of a fence, or else I could kiss them good-by. Fences don't spend time admiring diamonds. They've got their outlets and get rid of the hot stuff as soon as possible.

I got into my car and waited. Sooner or later Marie Stanton would come home. Or maybe I could back the maid into a corner and get some names out of her. Any dame that came up that walk would be practically kidnaped into my car. At the moment I had nothing to go on, except a long shot—Mrs. Donahue's boy friend. There wasn't much else I could do at this time of night. In the morning I'd see what the pawnshops had to offer.

I heard the car coming up behind me. It was a cab. Mrs. Stanton hustled out. She fumbled inside her bag, slapped a bill into the hackie's hand and turned to run up the walk. She made it halfway before I got in front of her. She backed away, her fist going up to her mouth as if to push back a scream.

"It's me, Mrs. Stanton," I said, not moving. "Jim Breen."

The air whistled out of her teeth. "You frightened me."

I took her arm. "I'm sorry. Give me five minutes of your time."

"Please." She looked up at the house. It was dark in front. A square of yellow light lay across the gravel road leading to the garage. "I am very tired."

"Everybody's tired. Just five minutes. We can sit in my car."

Her arm trembled as I touched it. She pulled away. "No. I don't wish to sit in your car." I must have had "sex fiend" written all over my face. She said, "There's a park bench around the bend."

She walked stiffly, glancing furtively over her shoulder every few steps until I got the impression she was either expecting someone or was looking for a chance to break away

from me.

I said, "I didn't expect you for hours." She just stared at me. I said, "That's the way it usually is when a girl goes out on a date. Lousy picture?"

She plunked herself down on a bench with a sigh, as though she'd been standing for hours and needed a rest. The lamplight was clean and strong.

Her face expressed a shrug. "I had no date. I just went for a long walk." Back stiff, eyes big and restless, she kept both hands on her handbag. "Mr. Breen, I would like to get to bed."

I gave her a smile. "What frightened you, Mrs. Stanton?"

"You did, Mr. Breen; *you* frightened me. I didn't expect a man to come pouncing down on me out of nowhere. You could have called out, you know."

"You were scared stiff before I came after you. Or do you always come hurrying home in a taxicab, fling money at the driver, and go trotting up the walk?"

She looked at me out of dark eyes, round and full of some kind of fear. "You ask so many irrelevant questions, Mr. Breen. I am not a brave girl, and darkness always frightens me. Jim—you don't mind if I call you Jim?"

She could call me anything she liked, even if the play *was* obvious as a guy without a head.

I said, "Of course, honey." I put my hand on her thigh, felt the muscle quivering to my touch but the smile never left her face.

She said, "Why don't you come back tomorrow? I won't be so tired."

Those promises were back in her eyes. She wanted to get rid of me pretty badly. I looked down at her bag. She followed my gaze. Her knuckles grew white as she clenched the bag harder. I leaned back on the bench.

She said, "Why don't I meet you some place tomorrow?"

"No, I've got to know something tonight. Maybe I'm wasting time but I've got to know. You wouldn't have a cigarette?"

Off guard, she opened the bag, then snapped it closed with a sound that seemed loud. "I have no cigarettes," she blurted out. Her mouth quivered as we stared at each other. I had

to get a look inside that bag. Perhaps what it contained was none of my business but I had to know.

My nostrils twitched. I moved forward. There was a faint smell in the air, something tantalizingly familiar. I sniffed but the odor had gone.

I asked, "No cigarettes?"

She shook her head hard but said nothing.

I said, "I don't feel like smoking anyway. Tell me, did Mrs. Donahue have any visitors this afternoon?"

She thought awhile, and when I thought she'd forgotten the question, she said, "Just a man selling some kind of vacuum cleaner. But I wasn't home most of the afternoon, Mr. Breen."

"You can go back to calling me Jim, honey. That's how I feel."

She lifted her shoulders, her eyes disturbed. "Of course, Jim."

"Answer me one question and you can go."

She nodded, eager to get the inquisition over with so she could grab her bag and run.

I said, "Who's Mrs. Donahue's lover?"

Her mouth opened, and she blinked at me as if she'd never seen me before.

She found her tongue. "Mrs. Donahue? You don't know what you're saying."

"Then I made some kind of joke."

"Not a very funny one, I'm afraid. Mrs. Donahue loves my brother very much. Mrs. Donahue and a lover?"

"You make it sound as if you've never heard the word before. She could have one and not let you into her confidence."

She looked away, her face thin and tight. "Mrs. Donahue is a fine wife. She loves her husband."

I smiled. "Why get excited?"

Her words were sharp, almost shrill. "Why do you say such things? You have no right. You can't go pushing people around."

I put my hand back on her thigh, stopping her speech. She looked down at my widespread fingers and slapped my hand. I laughed, and this made her so angry she called me a

name ladies in society weren't supposed to have learned. I kept laughing, and the taut sharpness left her face.

"I'm going home, Mr. Breen. I don't intend answering any more of your questions." To prove it, she got up. I stayed put.

I said, "I still want the name of Mrs. Donahue's lover."

She cried, "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Then you, Marie Stanton, you've got a good friend who visits you occasionally when Mrs. Donahue is not at home."

Her voice was threaded with excitement. "That is not true."

I said, "Let's stop horsing around."

Her back stiffened. "As I said, it's none of your business."

I reached over, grabbed her handbag and came to my feet. She was frantic now, rushing at me, hands reaching. I held the bag behind my back, feet astraddle, a giant braced against a pygmy.

"Please, Jim, please, I beg you. Nothing in that bag concerns you. I swear it by all that I hold holy."

I said, "It's kind of heavy. Wouldn't it be funny if I reached inside and found knickknacks, like diamond rings and clasps, and stuff."

She put her arms around me, her body tight against mine. I could feel every curve, the very beat of her heart. My pulses began to race. I bent over and kissed her wet lips. They were hot, alive.

"Tomorrow, Jim," she whispered, holding my right hand. "I'll come wherever you want me to. We'll have breakfast together, Jim, just you and I."

I said, "I could go for that kind of a deal."

I fumbled with the clasp. The bag was heavy and it was difficult working it with one hand. I almost made it. At the last second, just as I was slipping my left hand inside, it dropped to the soft earth with a dull thud. I reached down to pick it up. Her knee caught me on the side of the head, knocking me to one knee. She dived for the bag but I grabbed it first. The only trouble was I'd clutched the bottom in my fingers and when I stood up the mouth opened and a lot of junk came tumbling out; a calling card, a handkerchief, a mirror, a pack of Spearmint, some pins, keys . . . I stopped

looking. Right at my feet lay a shiny new-looking revolver. I picked it up and stared down at the .32 Colt.

She said bitterly, "Now that you've got a gun, what will you do with it?"

I didn't know. I could turn it over to the cops but, as she'd said, it was none of my business. In fact, I had a feeling that the whole damn mess—Mrs. Stanton and her lover, or was it Mrs. Donahue's lover?—was none of my damn business.

I said, "I hope you didn't plug somebody I know."

Her lips looked dry. There was a sickness in her eyes. "I did not shoot anyone. But arguing the point with you will prove nothing."

The revolver reeked with the smell of cordite. I broke it open. There wasn't a live bullet in the chambers.

I said, "I hope he deserved it. With your face and legs, no jury'd vote a conviction."

She was clinging to me again. "You won't, Jim . . . you can't give this to the police."

I said, "Give me the right answers and I'll forget I ever saw you tonight."

Tears flooded her eyes and ran down her face unheeded. No sound of crying came out of her mouth.

I said, "Mrs. Donahue had a visitor, somebody who used to come say hello when your brother wasn't at home. Right?"

She shook her head. "No, it's wrong."

"C'mon, baby, I want the truth or so help me, I hand this gun over to the first cop I meet."

"All right, all right," she cried. "Yes, a visitor, a lover. That's what you want to hear, isn't it?"

"I just want the truth. What's this man's name?"

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, then, with such suddenness it startled me, she began to laugh, a crazy, brittle kind of cackling bordering on hysteria. I thought she'd never stop. I slapped her hard. She stopped abruptly and stared at me with glazed eyes.

"His name?" she said. "It won't make any difference."

"Speak out," I hollered, grabbing her arms, shaking her.

"Frank Sanders," she said. She thought of something and began to giggle. I didn't have to slap her again. It stopped as suddenly as it had started. "President Street," she said.

"1662 President Street."

I looked down at the revolver, shiny in my palm. Her eyes followed mine. I opened her handbag and dropped the gun inside. I took her arm and steered her back to her house.

I said, "Your brother and sister-in-law knew this Sanders?"

"They knew him." Her voice became harsh. "He wasn't good enough for their high society." She stopped short, shook her head. "Don't mind me."

"I gather this Frank Sanders wasn't exactly welcome in this house."

She lifted her head high. "It wasn't Eva; she was on my side. My brother forbade Frank to come here."

I said, "I'm sorry I had to be so rough." The door opened and Mrs. Donahue stood in the doorway.

"Marie? Oh, Mr. Breen . . ."

I said, "I was just leaving. Good night."

5.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER I pulled up before Frank Sanders' apartment house. I could have done it in ten if I was really in a hurry, but I needed those minutes to think. My brain, at times, can get mighty sluggish, and I had a feeling this was one of those times. Something bothered me and I didn't know what or why. And thinking about it didn't give me the answers.

Sanders lived in a row of identical three-story homes, with fire escapes running up the front of the building. You could get into the building by getting an answer to your buzz, or you could kick in the front plate glass door. I tried Sanders' buzzer. There was no answer. I leaned my elbow against the button and held it for a full minute. Still no answer.

I thumbed the buzzer of some party on the third floor, one above Sanders. I got the answering ring, the hall door jumping as the lock clicked. I started up the narrow wooden stairway. A door opened on the ground floor and a head, swathed in a green bandanna, came out to look me over. I kept going up. The lighting was pretty good. The stairway carpet was worn but soft enough to muffle footsteps.

"Who is it?" somebody on the third floor cried down.

I leaned against the wall and waited for a few seconds. Getting no answer, the third-floor party said something about snotty kids ringing bells. A few seconds later, a third-floor door slammed.

Sanders' apartment door had no outside bell, no knocker, just his name on a cardboard paper in a slot. A pale yellow light showed in the dusty transom and from under the door. I knocked. A kid upstairs began to howl. A man swore and the kid howled louder. A woman cried out something obscene and the kid shut up. I knocked again. A door upstairs opened and the same man called out a name identifying his wife's occupation; then the door slammed hard and the man came down the stairs. He gave me a look, as if somehow I'd disrupted his family life, and continued down the stairs.

I tried the knob. The door opened as if oiled. I pushed it in and looked into a kitchen. There was yellow-and-blue linoleum on the floor, a five-piece chromium kitchen set, one chair overturned, some broken glass on the sink drain. In the center of the kitchen floor was a pool of claret. Somehow I wasn't surprised. Somehow I'd expected to run into blood and violence.

I walked in, closed the door and leaned against it for a second. Somehow I'd known that I'd smell cordite in Frank Sanders' apartment. I walked to the red stuff in the center of the room. The glass in the dish closet door had a neat hole, the kind a .32 caliber revolver could make. Just under the metal match box nailed to the wall was another hole. My eyes went back to the pool of blood, the drops big as quarters leading toward the foyer. I followed, knowing damn well what I was going to find, knowing that very night I'd seen the gun that had done the job, and the frightened, dark-haired woman who had done it—Marie Stanton.

There was a lot more blood in the foyer, and in the white calcimine of the ceiling another bullet hole, this one rough, irregular. The blood trail led to the bathroom. I pushed open the bathroom door and there was the corpse, the head and shoulders hanging over the bathtub, the bottom half of the torso out on the floor. The body wore nothing but a pair of blood-soaked shorts and an undershirt. There were two holes

in his back, through which his life's blood had run out.

I grabbed a handful of hair and lifted the head. Somebody had massaged the face with a set of brass knuckles, or possibly a miniature baseball bat. The nose was spread like a pancake. Two drops of dried blood stuck in the nostrils, and strips of adhesive were taped above each eye and over the right cheek bone. The lips were in shreds. There was no blood on his face except a thin dry line running from his lips to his chin.

Somebody, it seemed to me, had given him a little workout, permitted him to wash up, decorate his face with adhesive, then emptied the gun in his direction as he'd raced for the bathroom. Two slugs had hit their mark. He probably had been hit in the kitchen and had gone down. The killer had watched him get up and stalked him to the bathroom, shooting, missing, finally connecting with another slug.

I let the head drop and walked out into the kitchen. I found the bedroom. The lights were blazing. Every drawer in the chest of drawers was on the bed, the contents scattered. Suits and shirts and undergarments were strewn over the floor. The clothes closet door was open, a traveling bag, ripped into shreds, scattered on the floor. Somebody had given the apartment a once-over-not-so-lightly, somebody with time on his hands and no place special to go.

I caught a glimpse of a blue disk on the floor, near the foot of the bed. I squatted to pick it up. Under the bed was a playing card. I had to get on my knees to reach it. The disk was a poker chip. On each side in white fancy letters it read *Parley*. The playing card was the eight of clubs, an oddly designed card with blue grapes on the back. I flipped the chip, caught it and slipped it into my change pocket. The card got better treatment, right next to a twenty-dollar bill in my wallet.

I went to the chest of drawers and looked around, banging my knuckles against the sides, the bottom, the top, knowing in my heart I'd find no secret compartments, yet hoping I was wrong.

A rough voice hit me behind the neck. "Reach for the ceiling, mister, or I'll plug ya."

I reached, glancing into the vanity mirror, sighing with relief when I saw the brass buttons and blue coat.

"Sometimes it's nice to see a cop," I said, lowering my arms.

He was on me, jabbing the .38 Colt regulation into my back. "Maybe it is but keep reaching, mister."

Another blue coat came in to look at me. I told them they were wasting time, I was Jim Breen, Bender's Insurance Company. The cop facing me said nothing as he walked out of the bedroom.

From outside I heard a woman's voice rise and fall in a kind of wail, "I seen him sneaking up the stairs and knew he was a burglar. Look at the blood." Her voice jumped. "Where's Mr. Sanders? Where's that lovely Mr. Sanders? He must have done something to Mr. Sanders."

Her scream seemed to come from a mile away, moving closer and closer until it went into my left ear and lifted my scalp inches off my skull in a long, terrifying howl that made the young cop with the gun pale.

The other cop came racing back. "Hell, this is no job for us. We need the homicide boys!"

6.

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT McCarthy sat on the window sill in the living room, facing me as I rested on a comfortable club chair. A uniformed cop stood near the door, glancing back occasionally to where sounds came from around the foyer. The police department was at work, and they could be noisy as a gang of kids collecting firewood. Grinning happily, he returned to the bathroom and the corpse. McCarthy flicked ashes from his cigarette. He was a well-built man with smooth-skinned features. A red spot glowed just under his left cheek bone, giving him an angry look. Smoke rolled through his big seltzer-bottle nose.

I lit a cigar. It was a good cigar—Corona-Corona. I'd taken a couple out of the humidor standing on the coffee table.

McCarthy said, "You insurance investigators are cute babies. Maybe this time you were too damn cute."

I blew smoke. "You don't have to use the hose on me, Mac.

Just get the confession typed up and I'll John Hancock it."

"There's nothing to laugh about, buster. Don't make me prove it to you. You think you're a funny guy, full of jokes. Murder isn't funny; it never is."

"What the hell do you want, Mac? You got my story. You want me to repeat it?"

There was a sudden edge to his voice. "Once was enough. Your story stinks." He mimicked me. His act was worth a laugh under normal conditions, but he was right: murder never is a funny subject. He went on, "I got a tip Frank Sanders was mixed up in a couple of jewelry holdups so I hotfooted it down here, pushed open his door, and there he was, dead as a pigeon."

I laughed shortly. "You'd make a lousy witness, Mac. I told you I rang the bell downstairs, *then* banged on the door upstairs. In fact, I banged the door so hard it just opened. I saw the red pool on the kitchen floor, figured it was real and came in to investigate. I did what any normal man would do."

"Sorry, I won't buy that yarn. You came in here and looked around. You had no warrant."

"Okay, next time I see a guy swimming in his own blood, I'll first get a warrant. You gonna book me, Mac?"

"Don't rush me."

"You want me to pick out the section of the Penal Code?"

"I'd like to make it murder, only the time element is screwed-up. The medical examiner figures Sanders got knocked off between eight-thirty and nine-thirty. Maybe the neighbors can corroborate that; somebody must have heard the shots. The landlady saw you come in around ten-fifteen. Unless you were dumb enough to do the job, leave and come back . . ." A light shone in his eyes. Now he looked positively handsome in a brutal sort of way. "You could have come back to do a better job of searching the joint. That could account for the missing murder gun."

I yawned. "Even you don't believe that."

He put on his favorite scowl. "You could talk it into me, you and your cockeyed story."

"Give me time and I'll think up a tale that'll give me a good rating. Mac, you want me to dream up a story? I gave it to you right from the heart. Bender's Insurance Company

is on its last legs, what with the epidemic of stick-ups and burglaries. So when somebody calls me up and tips me to where I can grab some of the loot—"

"Who called you?" There was a slow hardening to his lips. "That's what I wanna know—who?"

"Anonymous."

He spit on the carpet. "That guy 'anonymous' sure gets around. Didn't he want any reward? Aah!" He waved his hand in disgust. "You and your goddam insurance company. If I had anything to say I'd drive out of business every insurance outfit who plays ball with thieves."

I was astounded. "Mac, what you saying?"

"Don't give me that. I know what you guys are doing." He emphasized the point with a forefinger. "And that's why you got this epidemic of heist jobs. You guys think you're doing the smart thing, buying hot ice, saving a couple bucks. You're a shortsighted bunch of bastards. You save fifty or sixty percent of the haul by paying cash, no questions asked. Then these same crooks go out and grab some more of your clients and you're paying all over again. Like the blackmail racket, paying off doesn't end it."

I sighed. "Mac, did you think of running for office? You make your point so effectively. Mac, I agree with you. There's only one fact that makes your argument a waste of time as far as I'm concerned. I never bought stolen goods in my life."

He took a turn around the room and stopped inches away from me. "This tip you got from 'Mr. Anonymous,' he didn't tell you Sanders was mixed up in the Donahue job?"

"Donahue? You mean—?"

He exploded. "You know damn well what I mean. Don't act like you never heard the name."

"Mac, I don't know what's got into you. You hit me with a name, and when my mind doesn't click so fast, you're ready to slice my throat. Sure I know the Donahue case. Hell, Mac, I'm working on it. Why the hell shouldn't I know the name?"

His face came close to me. "Then maybe you can tell me if Sanders was mixed up in the Donahue case."

"Could be. I was going to ask him about it. But I came too late."

His lips worked as if he had a sour mouthful and couldn't make his mind up where to spit it. "Somebody emptied a .32 at Sanders, two of the slugs made holes in his back. The house has been ransacked from stem to stern. And those marks on his face aren't birthmarks. Doesn't that sound like big stuff to you? Don't tell me some petty thief did this job. This is grand larceny, felony murder, and I got a feeling there's eighty grand of jewelry mixed up in it. And nothing you can say will convince me otherwise."

I lifted my hands ceilingward. "I wouldn't even try, because you might be absolutely right. It makes sense. Only he could have been beaten up and killed because some guy just didn't like his guts. It's happened before."

"And then the guy ransacked the house?" His grin was big and triumphant. "Fit that one in. They beat him up trying to get him to tell where the jewelry was hidden; when he clammed up, they looked around. Finally, when they found the stuff, they gave him the business."

I shook my head so hard, the ashes came off my cigar and dropped in my lap. I stood up to shake them off. "I can't see it like that. One guy, two guys, a dozen guys give Sanders a little workout. He bleeds like a pig. So they finally soften him up so that he tells where to find what they're looking for—let's say it's the swag. Now what?"

"They don't want anybody putting a finger on them later on, so they play it safe and knock him off. Or it could be they're one big gang and little Frankie pulled a double cross."

I flung my cigar into a corner. "Mac, you're moving away from me. At what stage does the killer stop to let Sanders wash and dress his face cuts? If I'm going to kill a guy, I'm going to press the trigger and get it over with. Why pretty Sanders up for the undertaker?"

"Some killers are psycho that way."

"Besides, this killing doesn't look like a professional job."

"I seen coked-up killers miss bad. But you got something. A guy who can keep Sanders helpless enough to kick the crap out of him, shouldn't have any trouble keeping him still long enough to put a slug in the back of his head. Unless this psycho liked to play games."

A detective came into the room and shoved his hat back on his head. He looked tired and disgusted.

"Everybody in the building needs one of them hearing aids. Nobody heard the shots."

I said, "Could have been a silencer."

McCarthy smacked his lips. "Bet my month's pay there was no silencer, and at least six of the eight tenants heard the shots. Five of the six thought it was a car backfiring; the other one closed his lips and decided he'd mind his own business. Now all six have decided not to get mixed up in a killing. Funny thing about people: they get rooked, they holler for help, but ask them to give a hand, and they don't know you."

The draftsman came in, his grin bigger than ever. McCarthy walked over to him and they stood talking in whispers in the center of the room. I took out a fresh cigar, and went to throw the wrapper into the ash tray on the end table. About to turn away, I noticed the matches—they were the paper kind that can be split up the center with a fingernail. Somebody had discovered how many layers of paper make-up a match. He had opened nine paper strips down to the blackened match head and had spread the strips open in a floral design. Three matches were in the tray, two unopened. I picked up the pretty one. McCarthy growled into my ear. "Keep your hands off things, Breen, can't you?"

"Just a lousy match."

"Three lousy matches. I saw them ten minutes ago. Let them lay there." His voice kept rising. "Maybe the fingerprint boys can do something with them. Maybe not. Maybe Sanders liked to play with matches. Maybe the killer spent a little time playing while he talked to Sanders. Maybe you should mind your own damn business."

"Mac, I was only curious—"

"This is a murder case!" He shrieked so loud two cops came running from around the foyer. He glared at them and they went back to what they were doing. He stuck a finger under my nose. "You stick to buying stolen goods from crooks. That's *your* speed."

"What the hell you sore about, Mac? You have a fight with the missus? I got a job digging up stolen jewelry. It's my

job to save money for my company—half of which I own. That's my job, Mac, and no big shot detective is gonna holler at me for no reason. Sure, I'll stay out of your murder case. I wouldn't give a damn if a dozen people were knocked off, including you. But if there's any connection between murder and hot ice that'll help me recover the jewelry, I'm gonna find out what it's about, and nobody's gonna stop me. Once I recover the jewelry, I'll step out of this case and you can knock your brains out against a stone wall for all I give a damn. If you don't like it, you can go scratch your big ass with a broken beer bottle. Now can I get out of here?"

He smiled, suddenly calm and composed. "Sure, Breen, you can beat it in a few minutes." He sat down in a club chair and leaned back comfortably. "First do a little strip for McCarthy. You don't have to be artistic. Just drop your clothes right on the floor."

"This is unnecessary," I hollered. "Or wouldn't you know."

He grinned. "Maybe the killer got the jewelry. Maybe you had better luck. Don't be so damn bashful. Bet if I was a blonde you wouldn't argue about it."

He was right. Blonde or flatfoot, there was no use arguing about it. He could keep me there all night if I got stubborn, and then strip me forcibly when he got tired of waiting. I told him if I caught cold in my fanny, he'd pay for it. He kept laughing until all my clothes were on the floor.

When McCarthy had finished the job he had the poker chip and playing card. I stepped into my shorts.

"What are these, Breen?"

"A chip and a card. Hell, Mac, must I go into a long-winded explanation of how I played a little poker and kept the chip and card as souvenirs?"

"Where you play poker?"

I buttoned my shirt. "I'm no rat for the cops."

He blew air into his fist. "You getting funny again? Right now I'm not interested in vice."

I reached for the chip. "Okay, then don't force me to tell you where I played poker last week."

He let me take the chip, but held onto the card, examining the front and back carefully, holding it up to the light.

I said, "It's still an eight of clubs."

"One card," he said. "What the hell you doing with one card?"

I shrugged into my jacket. "I like the feel of it when I slip my hand into my pocket. Do I get it, Mac?"

He gave it to me, though somewhat reluctantly. "If I ever find out the card or chip is mixed up in this murder case, I'll throw you in the can for stealing evidence, and I'll keep you in the can for more years than you got left."

"Now maybe I can run along."

His lips drew back, exposing strong white teeth. "I'll know where to find you when I want you."

I went to the door.

I sat in my car under a lamp post and carefully examined the back of the playing card I'd found in Sanders' flat. I studied each grape, then the vines, looking for a mark I might recognize. The usual procedure in marking cards was to add something to the design, this method being much easier than blacking out print.

I finished my cigar and flung the butt into the gutter. I drove over to the all-night drug store on 57th Street. The druggist smiled at my request. Sure he had magnifying glasses. Anything else? No. I gave him the fifty-one cents and went back to the car. Under another lamp post, I hit pay dirt. At least it seemed that way when I found a mark inside the grape in the upper left-hand corner and in the grape in the lower right-hand corner. Each circle had a white pin-point dot exactly where the eight would be on a clock.

I'd seen decks marked by the clock method, the dots placed where the numerals of a clock would be—the thirteenth card, the king, designated by a dot in the center of the circle. The dots were so small, naked eyes could not see them, but a man wearing strengthened bifocals, knowing where and for what to look, could read the cards as if they lay face up.

I would have liked another card to check my findings. The dots could be flaws in the print, but I was sure it was no coincidence that the dots were exactly where they should be, on the eight spot of a clock. Frank Sanders had been

mixed up in a phony card game. Either he'd been taken for a sucker or he'd tried to take somebody else.

7.

IT WAS JUST twelve-forty when I found Lackell's, a small bar and grill on 52nd Street. I went to the washroom, and when I came out ordered beer and a roast beef sandwich. I wolfed down the sandwich and got another. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. While working on my third sandwich and third beer, I asked the bartender, "See Waxey around?"

The bartender, a bald-headed guy with bags under his eyes, shot me a curious look. He wiped a glass with his apron.

I said, "Waxey's a friend of mine."

He wiped the same glass again. "He's around all the time except when you need him."

I drank another beer and chewed on pretzels. At one o'clock, a man came in, a carnation in the lapel of his tweed jacket, his soft brown hat worn at a jaunty angle. He was a typical bookie who didn't care who knew it, as if being a book gave him a kind of prestige. In this neighborhood, that was true. The man lifted a manicured finger in the bartender's direction and was handed a Scotch and soda.

The bartender said, "What's good for tomorrow?"

The man said, without a smile. "My mother-in-law; she's good tomorrow and every day."

The bartender said, "Somebody give me a tip on Joanie in the fifth for tomorrow. She got a chance?"

"A dog. Put your dough on Blazing Fury."

His voice guarded, the bartender said, "Put me down for five across." Then, thinking of something, the bartender leaned over to whisper in the man's ear. The man's eyes met mine, then slanted off. He took his drink to an empty booth in the corner and sat down on the cushioned seat. I got another beer, walked across the floor, and squeezed in between the table and seat facing him. He flicked a lighter and lit his cigarette, a gleam of annoyance in his slate-gray eyes.

I said, "You're Waxey Sieger. Friend of mine told me you'd be the guy to see if I wanted to lay a couple of bets on anything."

He looked up at the ceiling.

I played with my wet glass. "He said you know everything and everybody. I been trying to lay a couple bets only my regular book, Barney Malin, ain't on his usual beat."

He smoked in short violent puffs, a bored look on his handsome face.

I said, "Pretty tough around here when a guy can't lose a couple of hundred bucks. Every book seems to have holed up. With the Feds working hand in hand with the city cops, it's really tough. My friend tells me Waxey Sieger is still strong enough to say the hell with the Feds and take a bet."

I said, "I don't like talking to myself."

He crushed his butt in the circular wooden ash tray. "Me no speak English. Look, mister, you got the wrong guy. I'm a respectable businessman. Waxey Sieger happens to be my name, but somebody gave you a bum steer."

I said, "And you never heard of Barney Malin?"

The silence lengthened and became heavy. He pulled at his lower lip and whistled soundlessly.

Finally he spoke, "I know Barney Malin."

"He used to book my bets. I don't know what happened to the guy."

"He was a book. He ain't in business these days on account of it takes dough, they tell me, which Barney ain't got."

I looked flabbergasted. "You don't say? You mean Barney lost and didn't pay off?"

Eyes probing, he said, "Did I say that? Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. I wouldn't know about that. He's just retired, that's all."

I took three tens out of my wallet, dropped them on the table. "On Blazing Fury tomorrow. On the nose."

He didn't look at the money. "You're wasting time, mister."

"My friends call me Jim."

"You're still wasting time, mister."

I shrugged, picked up the money. "Nowadays everybody is scared of his shadow." I seemed to get a fresh idea. "Can't a guy get into some game in this town? Craps or blackjack would be okay. I'm just itching to get my fist

wrapped around a pair of dice. Strongarm Jim they used to call me. Once knocked off sixteen passes in a row."

His lips curled. "You make two bucks?"

"More," I said indignantly. "I made more than fifty. Small game. If I'd've doubled my bets I'd have made a lot more. But, hell, I ain't a pig."

"Let's not start an argument. Mister, you an out-of-towner?"

I laughed. "How did you know? I keep traveling around months at a time. Last time I was in this town, there was a wonderful crap game. Dropped fifty, but I had fun. I'd like to get into the game again. Only I don't know where it's floated to."

He said, "Couple places out in Jersey. Maybe I could steer you to one of them."

I took the chip out of my pocket. "Kept this chip for a souvenir." His eyes lit on the chip and suddenly his face lost all trace of expression. I said, "Something I said that didn't agree with you?"

He nodded woodenly. "You said something, that's enough. Look, mister, I don't know why you picked on me. This stuff about wanting a game is a lotta bunk. If you played in the joint that uses Parley chips it ain't floated anywheres; it's still there. So if it's still there, you must know where you played. So why bother me?"

I laughed. "Remember, did you say? Hell, I was so cock-eyed, I didn't know where my friends were taking me. It could have been right in here or up on the moon. It could have been any place and I still wouldn't know where I'd dropped my bankroll."

He stared vacantly. "I don't know." He lit another cigarette, eyes narrowing against the smoke. "I think you're a phony." He drew his lips flat against his strong teeth. "There's cars leave Broadway and 64th Street every once in a while. Ask for Sam Trenton. He'll take you out to a good crap game."

"Thanks," I said, spinning the chip on the table. "You couldn't tell me if this gambling joint is run by a guy named Rex Klinsky?"

He smiled with his thin lips. A piece of tobacco was lodged between the gum and an incisor tooth.

"Tell you what," he said. "Being I got nothing better to do for the next couple of hours, I'll take you out to the joint. Maybe I can give you tips on how to play the odds."

I said, "I got my car around the corner in the parking lot."

He got up and killed his butt in the tray. His eyes never left my face. "Let it stay there. We go up in your car and we gotta answer a lot of questions to a guy who guards the place. In Sam's car we go right in. Sam is a good friend of mine. You'll get a lift back so don't worry about it. Wait'll I wash my hands and I'll be with you."

In the mirror, I watched him pass the bartender and lift a finger. The bartender walked to the far corner of the bar, which was out of my view. I finished my beer and lit a fresh cigar.

There were six of us in the car, including the driver. Waxey and I sat in the back. To my right a moon-faced man chewed noisily. He blew gum and made bubbles and let them pop before he sucked the gum back into his mouth. One of the players in the front seat, a broad-shouldered man with a crumpled brown felt hat, was explaining his system on how to beat the house at blackjack. The man sitting between him and the driver sneered.

Waxey looked at his watch every few minutes. "C'mon, Sam," he said, "you run this bus like we got all night. Shove some pepper."

The driver looked into the mirror over his head. "What the hell's your hurry? You'll still have plenty time to break the game."

We reached Arverne and took a paved road to the right. After a while we could hear cinders hitting against the car. Waxey stopped looking at his watch. He sat up and moved to the edge of the seat like a fight fan waiting for the action to start. The car rolled to a gentle stop. A man in a dark hat, one hand in his pocket, came to the window, and while he exchanged a few words with the driver, his eyes swept the occupants of the car.

"Okay, Sam," he said, stepping back. "Take it easy. Save the cowboy stuff for the movies."

I looked back as the car started up the hill. The man in the dark stepped into a wooden structure a little bigger than

a telephone booth. Half a mile later we turned left and stopped.

The driver stretched. "Okay, fellers, we're home. Case you win, remember who brought you here. Sam Trenton accepts all tips, big and small. Good luck."

I stepped out of the car into the cool night air. A wind stirred the branches of the trees standing like sentinels all around the brown house up on the hill. It was an ugly-looking, squat structure, ghostly and dark. Not a light showed. It looked deserted. The whole area looked deserted. Then a round-shouldered man crossed the road and disappeared around the house. Under his left arm he'd held a submachine gun.

Waxey was at my shoulder. "You come to play or look at the scenery?"

I followed the driver up the two stairs. He didn't knock; the door just opened as if he'd hit an electric eye. We went into the yawning darkness, the door closing behind us. Bright electric lights went on. The men looked at each other, grinning, winking, thrilled with the counterfeit excitement. Hell, this was all a show. Whoever ran this place didn't have to worry about snoopers, not with the guards surrounding the few acres of land, ready to pounce upon any blundering wayfarer; not with the big bills this joint must have handed out to the local police force. Without the cops' protection, this place couldn't run twenty-four hours. Having that protection, there was nothing and nobody to fear. Except a stick-up; and that's what the outer guard and the men with the guns were for. But a bit of color could never hurt the attendance.

The doorman was a big man with big shoulders and a big gun in the holster on his left hip. Waxey whispered something in his ear. The man looked thoughtful and smacked his lips. After ushering the other three players into an adjoining empty room and carefully closing the door after them, he asked Waxey and me to wait a minute. Waxey lit a cigarette and eyed me shrewdly. At the moment he was the typical Broadway wiseguy, in the know, thinking everybody else to be a country hick. I smiled at him and for some reason this seemed to annoy him.

A short, tuxedo-clad man with long sideburns on his cherubic face came into the hallway. A black cigar stuck out of his even white teeth. Flanking him were two men, one tall and thin, the other chunky and short. They were Marty and Puggy, the two men who'd tried to take my friend Barney Malin on a trip. They stared at me, trying to place me. Marty's nose was puffed, leaning a little to his left.

Waxey said to me, "Say hello to Rex Klinsky."

"Hello," I said, "I'm Jim Breen. You give all your customers such a big welcome?"

Marty's nose jumped. "That's him! Puggy, that's the sonofabitch what done it."

"Yeh, yeh," Puggy cried.

"That's the guy," Marty cried, almost in tears. "He banged Puggy and me around when we went to bring Barney here."

"Knock it off," Klinsky said. "You gave me the details before. You showed me who the guy is. Okay. Enough."

They glared at me with an angry blasphemous look, lips moving silently.

I said, "There's something about this situation that intrigues me."

Klinsky's cigar shifted to the other side of his fat mouth. "We aim to please. Before you go home, if there's anything you don't understand, just ask."

I said, "I'm just loaded with questions, teacher."

His dark eyes watched my lips move, then stared at my nose. "So am I." He turned to Waxey. "What's the beef? Tom, the bartender in that gin mill, said you were coming out here with a guy who had trouble written all over him."

Waxey said, "I told him to give you a ring. This guy's too cute. He's been asking a lot of questions about where you run your game. He's trying to trace you, if you ask me. He keeps playing with one of your blue chips. I figured if he wants to know something so bad, maybe he should ask you direct."

Klinsky took the cigar out of his mouth, studied the white ash, flicked a chunk onto the carpeted floor.

"What did he want to know?"

Waxey shrugged. "Why don't you ask him? He says he's

looking for a game, only he don't know where there's one running. He keeps flipping that chip."

"You said that. So far you did a lot of talking, only you told me nothing. A guy asks questions, and he's got one of my chips, so you bring him out here? I lose fifty chips a day. They're souvenirs people like to hang onto. Get out of here!"

Waxey paled visibly. "I figured you'd want to talk to him. Go, try and do a guy a favor . . ."

Klinsky growled deep in his throat. "Next time, you call up first and ask." He looked at me and smiled. "It so happens I'm glad to see Jim Breen, but not because he's got one of my chips and asks questions about a game; it's just that I'm glad to meet the guy that kept my boys from doing their job." He took my arm. "Come on, Breen, let's have a drink."

I glanced at Marty and Puggy, fists clenched at their sides, fuming with impatience. "I'm sorry, fellers, you'll just have to wait until I have a drink with the boss."

Klinsky said, "Sure, let 'em wait, Breen. It'll whet their appetites more. My boys don't like to miss when I tell 'em to do something."

I said, "You were saying something about a drink."

He smiled thinly. "I did, didn't I?"

8.

KLINSKY'S OFFICE was at the end of the hall. He pushed open the heavy door and held it open while I went inside, then he let it slam closed. A tall thin man was writing into a ledger behind the mahogany desk. A long nose stuck out of a bony face, smooth and boyish. At first glance he could have been a seventeen-year-old kid or a man of forty-five. Only when you looked close could you see the shrewdness of his years in the violet eyes. His hands were long and smooth, the kind that could belong to a pickpocket or a faro dealer.

Klinsky said, "You finished, Kim?"

Kim patted the small intercom on the desk. "Wish to hell you'd get yourself a bookkeeper. I don't like work and you know it."

Klinsky laughed, "Me and you both, Kim Heller. How about you, Breen? You the working type?"

I said, "I am, but not through choice."

Kim Heller rolled down his shirt sleeves and smiled at me. "You wouldn't know some bookkeeping, Breen? No? Too bad. Between managing this joint and keeping books . . ." He shook his head sadly. "What the hell, a guy's got to eat."

I said, "That's what I keep saying only nobody listens to me."

Klinsky said, "I'm listening, Breen. What kind of work do you do?"

I said, "Investigator." Kim's eyes came up from the white sleeve he was buttoning. I said, "Bender's Insurance Company. We're looking for diamonds and things like bracelets and cameos and rings. You wouldn't have any hot stuff laying around here?"

Kim slipped into his jacket. "The guy's nuts if you ask me. What the devil would we be doing with hot jewelry?"

The cords in Klinsky's neck stood out like wire. "Hot jewelry? And here I was thinking you were some lousy two-bit thug trying to shake us down for a couple bucks."

I said, "Lucky I straightened you out."

He flung his cigar into the tray. "What you're looking for is ten times worse."

I laughed. "I don't dig that."

He slapped his chest. "Rex Klinsky a thief?" He went behind his desk and sat down in his swivel chair. "I still think something's screwy. Maybe you're an investigator, and maybe you're just beating your gums. I'm gonna find out who you *really* are. Kim, give the bum a frisk."

I moved away from Heller. "Keep your hands off me." I stopped short. Klinsky had stood up and his fat fist held a German Luger, pointed right at my belly. I said to Heller, "You come near me, I'll kick you right in the gut."

"Knock it off," Klinsky cried, waving the gun. "Frisk him."

I shrugged. "Okay, Heller, come and frisk."

Heller reached out. I slapped his hands away and as he turned, booted him in the rear. He sailed half-across the room and slid into the metal cabinet.

Wicked anger in his eyes, Klinsky said, "That'll cost

you something, Breen. Before you go home tonight, I'll let Marty and Puggy learn you a little respect for Rex Klinsky."

"I once had a dog named Rex. Any relative?"

He came around his desk, the gun steady. "Who you think you're talking to, some pisspot from Canarsie? You know what Rex means? Boss, that's what it means. Chief. Big mogul. King."

Heller had pushed himself off the floor. On unsteady legs, he moved in on me, rage in every line of his thin face. His beady eyes were fixed on a point between my legs. I knew what was coming. It was easy avoiding the kick. I side-stepped, caught the booted foot and lifted hard. He went down and over.

The gun drilled into my back. "Lift your hands," Klinsky said.

Feeling that his patience had worn out, I raised my hands high. Klinsky reached around me and lifted out my wallet with the ease of a professional pickpocket. I watched him move to the desk and go through my wallet. Heller got up and joined him. Klinsky lay the card on the desk, then the blue chip.

"A lousy chip," he muttered. "And that crazy Waxey makes a big stink about it. What's this card?" He glanced at each side. "You belong to the eight of clubs society or something?"

I said, "Just a card."

He read my identification papers carefully. After a while, he put them back into the wallet and dropped it on his desk. He tossed the Luger into a drawer to his right and shifted around in his chair to open a cabinet behind him. Glasses clinked. He came around with three whiskey glasses and a bottle of Haig and Haig.

He smiled. "I still owe you a drink, Breen."

I grinned. "I sure can use one."

Heller's voice was thin and cool. "With him, I don't drink. See you again, Breen. I'll see how the games are doing, Rex."

Rex waved him to a chair. "Sit down, Kim. I got enough guys to run the games without you worrying yourself so damn much. Sit down."

Heller talked with his arms and shoulders. "Somebody's

gotta keep an eye on things." He glanced at me. "I get sick every time I look at the bum."

"Sit down, I said." Rex Klinsky pointed. "Right there."

In a harsh tone full of revolt and rage, Heller said, "I don't wanna sit. All day I been sitting." He compromised. "I'll stand."

Klinsky stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged and turned to me. "All right, you're an investigator and you come here looking for hot jewelry. You're way off your trolley line. How much jewelry?"

"Eighty thousand dollars' worth. If I find it, I keep it. If somebody else finds it and turns it over to me, I can get him thirty thousand dollars cash and no questions asked."

Klinsky's lips puckered. "I know you didn't come here and expect to see the stuff laying around the floors. What really brought you here?"

Heller said, "It's the Donahue stuff. The papers are full of it. Maybe he thinks we did the heist job."

I ignored him. "Rex, I'm interested in Barney Malin. Of course, you know Barney."

Klinsky laughed shortly. "You should know that. By the way, why did you stick your nose into my business? You could've got yourself filled full of lead."

"You know, the hero stuff. This broad of Barney's was standing there. I felt like a heel just watching so I took a hand."

He waved his hand. "Knock off the crap. What about my friend Barney?"

"You always send your musclemen to say hello to your friends?"

Straight-faced, he said, "Just a gag; that's all it was. You made a mistake, Breen. I mean about Marty and Puggy. They don't forget things like that. They got pride, you know."

I put my palms on his desk and leaned forward. "How much does Malin owe you?"

"That's none of your business."

"I was just wondering how much you rooked him out of."

He came up out of his seat. "This is a legit place. Rex Klinsky never rooked anybody in his life. Why should I? We

work on a five percent cut and, believe me, it's enough even for a big spender like me. Why the hell am I explaining this to you, Breen? I don't like people who call Rex Klinsky a crook. And, Breen, I don't like *you*."

"Tomorrow," I said, "at high noon I'll take a gas pipe. Tell me Barney didn't lose money here. Tell me he's not in you for a big bundle."

"You I don't have to tell anything."

"The cops might insist they'd like to know, especially if they get the idea Barney did a heist job to make enough money to pay you back a lot of dough."

He snickered. "Who you scaring, Breen? Cops I can stick in my hip pocket. Look, I don't tell people like Barney Malin what they should do to make a buck. What he did is his business."

"I thought he might have paid you off in jewelry. If so, I'd like to bid for them."

Rage and disbelief cluttered his thick voice. "Don't you understand what I'm saying? The hell with the Donahue jewelry! Me, I like cash. This ain't a hock shop. Go sit yourself in one of the cars going back to the city. The faster the better. And pray Marty and Puggy ain't waiting for you outside."

"I can always get protection from you."

"You know what I'll give you? Ice in the winter. Any more questions?" He rocked in his chair and leered up at me. "Before I heave you out of here, just ask me what you'd like to know."

I smiled back at him. "If I went out there and shot a little craps, could you skip the loaded dice just this once?"

He stopped rocking, the leer gone. Something vicious was growing in his expression. He reached for the drawer where he'd thrown the Luger, but abruptly changed his mind.

His words were cold as a stiletto. "Next time you say a thing like that, I'll kill you. So help me God, I'll cut your belly wide open and let your guts run out. Rex Klinsky runs an honest game."

My smile took things for granted. "If you say so. You know how rumors travel."

"Who says so?" he hollered. "Tell me who says so?"

"Feller by the name of Frank Sanders."

Klinsky's forehead wrinkled. He turned to Heller. "I know Sanders? Well, tell me, do I know a bastard named Sanders?"

Heller said, "You know Frankie, cradle-snatcher Frankie with the beautiful hair wave."

"Him? He said that? He says I run a phony crap game?"

I watched Heller light a cigarette. "It was poker he was talking about. You took him over in a poker game with a marked deck."

He slapped the desk hard. "He should live so long. And maybe you're making all this up. Breen, go home."

"He was here yesterday, wasn't he?"

Heller said, "And the day before and the day before that."

Klinsky yelled at Heller. "Knock it off. No more questions, no more answers. Breen, go drop dead some place."

I sighed. "What the hell you afraid of, Klinsky? Maybe I can prove you don't run a legit game."

He shot around his desk like he'd been jammed with a needle. "Damn you!" he cried. "You prove it. Go on, prove it."

I said, "Would you mind getting your face away from me? You ate garlic, and the wind is blowing in my direction." Before he could say anything, I said, "Give me a deck of cards, the kind with the blue grapes on the back. I don't know why but I always liked blue grapes."

Klinsky's face swelled and there was a bluish tinge around the lips. "Give him a deck," he cried. "Kim, shove a deck down his big mouth."

Kim Heller went to the cabinet in the corner of the room. In a few seconds he'd fished out a deck of playing cards. He flung it angrily in my direction. I caught it off my chest.

"This is one of the legit decks, I assume?"

Heller growled. "You got a big trap. Somebody ought to close it for you."

I broke open the seal and split the cellophane wrapper. The design on back of the cards was identical with that of the card on Klinsky's desk. I slipped the cards back into the cardboard box.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll let you know how the experiment comes out."

Klinsky pounded the desk. "You're a lousy phony, that's what you are. I got a mind to cut you up into little pieces."

"Like Frank Sanders?" I said softly. "You or your henchmen cut him up plenty. Some job you did on his face before you murdered him."

Klinsky stared vacantly. "Somebody murdered Sanders?"

"You heard me. Somebody beat the crap out of him. Somebody played around with his face. It looked as if it'd been stepped on by size sixteen shoes. Then somebody plowed a couple slugs into his back."

Heller gasped. "Some more stuff you're making up, Breen?" He shook his head. "No, you're leveling on that all right. Poor guy. He wasn't half-bad."

I spit dryly. "Save the crap, Heller. You don't sound a bit convincing." I whirled on Klinsky, who stood as if paralyzed. "Why was Sanders given the business? He find out you run a phony game?"

Klinsky howled. "You no-good louse!" Throwing angry looks at me over his shoulder, he returned to his seat. "I don't talk to you no more. My boys, they'll talk for me. Out." I could hear the door open behind me. I slipped out of my chair and turned.

She was tall, six feet maybe, and her body had been poured into a blue beaded gown that set somebody back half a grand. Her eyes must have been blue, but at the moment anger had turned them a couple of shades darker. She was a good-looking dame with henna hair and a hard, full mouth and the biggest pair of busts since Jane Russell lost out to Dagmar.

"Kim?" She let out a couple words that didn't come from my dictionary. "I've been looking for you."

Heller growled. "Okay, so you found me."

She said, "There's a guy out there in the game room. A smart guy with a big filthy mouth. You should hear the language he used."

"Knock it off," Klinsky yelled. "What the hell am I running here, a burlesque house?"

She saw me for the first time. "Oh, hello." Blue eyes moved up to my hair, then down to my face.

Heller cried, "Go back to the game room."

She looked at me while she spoke to Heller. "Aren't you going to tell that bum something?"

Klinsky said, "Stuff up your ears; maybe you won't be sensitive."

9.

MY MOUTH was dry all of a sudden. I got up and came close enough to look at the bracelet she wore on her right wrist. It was platinum, with a lot of chip diamonds on each side of a carved yellow topaz. Unless this bracelet had a twin, at long last I'd gotten a look at some of the Donahue swag. Anyway, the description fitted perfectly. To be sure, I'd have to check with the photographs on file in Bender's. I called myself a couple of names for not having found time to study the photographs.

I said, "Give the lady a drink. Sit down, honey, and join the party."

"Thanks," she said sweetly. "Bella Parker is the name."

"Rex," Heller said, "I don't like it when somebody bothers my girl."

I said, "Who's bothering her? Bella, I'm Jim Breen. Call me Jim. When you get tired of that, call me honey."

She giggled. "Hello, Jim. I better go now. I'm only a working girl, you know."

"When can I see you again?"

"Any time."

Heller yelled. "What am I, a piece of wood?"

She finished, "If you got money that's burning a hole in your pocket, I'm in the game room."

"I'm not interested in games right now. What I'd like to know is where do you park your hat? I'd like to come over and say hello. Maybe we could take in a movie, or something."

Her eyes were warm on my face. "Sorry, Jim, but I'm strictly business."

Klinsky said, "Good for you. Now will you go back?"

She said to me, "But you could give me a ring sometime. I might be in the mood for a little canasta."

Heller scowled fiercely, "You forget what I done to you the last time you got a guy hot and bothered?"

"Bye, now." She smiled at me.

Her body was alive, every muscle, every curve on the go. The backside had a movement Bulova could have used. After the door closed after her, I stared at nothing. I wasn't thinking of Miss Bella Parker. My mind was on that bracelet. Anyway, that's what I told myself.

Klinsky said sadly, "Now it's your turn to get out, Jim."

I took two steps nearer to him. "First, you'll have to guarantee me safe passage. Those goons are waiting outside, and I don't like the language they speak."

He looked up. His eyes searched me. Suddenly he yanked at his desk drawer and stuck his hand inside. I slammed the flat of my foot against the drawer. Klinsky came up out of his seat, howling like he'd touched a hot rivet. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Heller fishing inside the cabinet. I pulled at the drawer. Klinsky dropped to his knees, his face screwed up in pain. Funny sounds were coming out of his mouth.

"You broke it," he cried, blowing on his fingers. "You broke my hand."

The Luger was in my fist when Heller's first slug clipped pieces off the wall behind me. The roar of the gun rolled around the room like thunder. I dropped behind the desk and pushed Klinsky out of my way.

Heller said, "You'll never get out of here alive."

I looked around the desk and saw his left leg moving toward me. I pumped but missed. The legs disappeared. I flattened myself on the floor the better to look under the desk. Heller stood three feet in front of the desk. I aimed at his left foot, just over the ankle. Before I could squeeze the trigger, Heller jumped onto the desk. I half-turned just in time for his feet to jam into my stomach, then slide down my legs. The air whooshed out of me. I grabbed him around the waist and held with desperate strength. He grunted something and turned to get his right hand around so he could stick his revolver into my face. I shifted my right hand, slipped it around his neck and squeezed as hard as I could. He stiffened, then went suddenly limp. I

squeezed some more. Satisfied he was out, I pushed him off me.

First I grabbed the Luger, which had dropped out of my hand; then for a full minute I lay there, catching my breath, my eyes on Klinsky. He sat against the window base, still blowing on his damaged hand and moaning. I got off the floor and slapped dirt from my trousers.

I taunted him, "Not even a lousy scratch and you cry like a baby. Klinsky, the king of the cry babies."

He held up his hand, his eyes sick with pain. "I'll kill you for this." The fingers were swelling fast. "You broke my hand."

He swore savagely and I told him a fitting place to stick his fingers. Abruptly he stopped moaning, his eyes on Heller.

"You killed him?"

I leaned over Heller and slapped his face twice. He stirred, tried to sit up, then fell back.

Klinsky got up, groaning with the effort.

I said, "Big shot Klinsky. A couple of squeezed fingers." Heller was on his feet. He stood there feeling his Adam's apple, swallowing a couple times to test it. I said, "Guess I'll be moving out of here now."

Heller laughed harshly. "How far you think you're gonna get before a tommy gun rips you in half?"

I smiled at Klinsky. "Rex, you'll give me a safe-conduct pass." Klinsky's lips moved. Pure unadulterated hate shone in his eyes.

"Like a herring," he said, "they'll cut you into little pieces." Anticipation made him laugh. "Little pieces nobody'll find."

The buzzer sounded from the intercom on Klinsky's desk. I moved to his side and waved the Luger in his fat face.

"Go on and talk, but don't forget when to stop."

He hesitated as he glanced across at Heller, who was sucking on a cigarette. He leaned on the desk and flicked the switch.

"Yes, what is it?"

The voice sounded like sandpaper working on steel. "That Penny Keller is here. You know, Malin's broad."

Klinsky barked, "Tell her to go home."

The voice was apologetic. "She's got hot pants. She won't

budge till she sees you."

"Get her a cake of ice and sit her down on it." He slapped the switch, and the sandpaper voice was stilled in the middle of a sentence. "Damn that dame." He looked at me, smiled. "You going now, Breen?"

I nodded. "Klinsky, the two of us will take a ride to the city."

His cheeks swelled. "With you I go no place."

"I could knock you off here, you and Heller, and nobody'd know until long after I was on my way."

He paled. "You talk from heat."

Heller had more nerve. "I got an idea Puggy and Marty are waiting for you outside. That Luger won't stop them. Maybe they'll kill you, maybe not. But you'll wish they had. After they get through with you, you'll walk on crutches for the rest of your life."

I jabbed the Luger into Klinsky's back. "Order your car out front. I don't like crutches, and I will kill a guy just so as not to have to use them." Klinsky opened his mouth. I jammed the Luger into his spine with such force, he howled. "Order your car. We don't need a chauffeur. Pray nobody stops to ask questions, because you'll be the first one to get a slug."

He flipped a switch on the intercom. The same gruff voice answered. Klinsky looked at me and looked at the gun. Scowling fiercely, he ordered the man to have his car ready out front. "I'm going into town," he said. Klinsky slapped down the switch and slumped heavily into his chair, his arms folded across his chest, his black eyes full of murder. He stared at me as if daring me to move him, knowing he'd start walking when I gave the sign.

Heller lit a fresh cigarette and leaned nonchalantly against the wall. A smile pulled up the corners of his lips.

I said, "Sorry, pal, I'm not taking you with us. It isn't anything personal."

He shrugged. "No hard feelings, Breen."

"Neither am I leaving you here to blow the whistle on me the minute we leave."

The smile vanished. "What's the play, Breen?"

"Turn around, face the wall." He turned slowly. "Now

put your palms flat on the wall."

He said coolly, "What we gonna do, play Johnny-on-the-pony? Breen, why don't we make it easy on both of us? As you know by now, that door will keep in any noise. Even if I hollered my brains out, nobody'd hear me. It's soundproof. Why don't you tie me up?"

"I haven't got the time."

I banged the heel of the Luger on the back of his head. He moaned softly, his hands sliding down the wall. I had to give it to him again. His face thudded into the carpet. I motioned Klinsky out of his seat. He hesitated, then he glanced at Heller and got up. I grabbed Heller by one leg and dragged him behind a cabinet, just in case somebody opened the door to say hello. I slipped the Luger into my jacket pocket.

"Klinsky," I said, "maybe you can signal one of your gang without me catching wise, but if I were you I'd play it safe. If anybody makes a threatening motion in my direction, I'll put a slug up your big fat ass. Once we get a safe distance away, you can get out of the car. There's nothing I want out of you right now except a safe-conduct pass. And I couldn't think of a better pass than Rex Klinsky himself."

The muscles on his neck twitched and the redness came up from his throat and spread like make-up over his ample cheeks. His lips were a straight white line. I had a feeling that if he tried to answer me, the tears of humiliation would come rolling down. I took my wallet, playing card, and blue chip from his desk and slipped them into my coat pocket. He watched me closely, eyes alert.

I opened the door and motioned him to move. He brushed past me, and I walked about twelve inches behind him as we went down the hall. The man at the door looked around.

Klinsky's voice was hardly recognizable. "I'm going into town. I'll be back as soon as I can. Keep things rolling."

The man's forehead creased. "Whatsamatter with Kim? He's—"

Klinsky growled, "Kim is busy." He turned to look at me. I was not too close to him to draw suspicion yet not too far away from him to get confidence in his ability to duck be-

hind his tough boy. His gaze dropped to my pocket as he said to the doorman, "Open up."

10.

THE MAN opened the door and we stepped out into the darkness. The night was cool, soft, and a light wind stirred the leaves. The piece of moon was perched on a tree away out in the distance. The air held a clean smell, as if someone had just cut the grass.

A new Cadillac stood in front of the steps. The place looked deserted. I put my hand on the car handle and, so suddenly my stomach pulled up into a tight knot, Marty and Puggy were on top of us. I stayed closed to Klinsky. If I'd let Marty or Puggy get between us, sure as hell Klinsky would make a break for it.

Marty had both hands in his pockets. I looked at Klinsky. He looked back at me, his face blank as a poker player's.

Marty said, "We got something to settle with this guy."

Puggy said, "Let us take him."

I didn't say anything. My eyes were on Klinsky, my right hand itching. The Luger felt as big as a cannon and as friendly as a kiss. Without it, I was the proverbial dead pigeon. With it, I could flap my wings and get out of danger. Maybe . . .

Klinsky's eyes left my face. He'd seen enough to bring out drops of moisture on his forehead. The last thing he wanted was to get caught in a cross fire.

He said, "What's your hurry? You can't wait another day?"

Marty said, "He'll get away."

"How far can he get? This is a small world. Let him go; when we want him we'll get him. It's an odds-on bet we'll see him again."

I heard the stomp of feet, the shack door closing. "Rex?" It was a woman's voice. A shadow came down the stairs and moved toward us. "Rex, I've got to talk to you." It was Penny. She hardly glanced at me as she went to the open car door. "Rex, what's the idea? I've been waiting in there to see you." His eyes came back to me. Recognition came suddenly. "You! What are you, my conscience?"

"Hello, Penny," I smiled. "Rex, meet Penny."

"See me tomorrow," Rex said to her. "Tonight I'm one busy guy."

Her knuckles were white where they clutched the door. "Rex, I can't wait. I've got to know now, tonight."

Klinsky cried. "It can wait. What the hell's the hurry? This is no emergency."

I said to Penny. "Hop in the back and we'll give you a lift. Maybe you can soften Rex up by the time we hit the city."

Klinsky shook his head angrily. "Let her go back where she came from. I said tomorrow."

I got inside the car. "Don't mind Rex, honey, he's just sore at the world. Hop in. No, not in the back. I changed my mind. I'd like you so close to me we can rub elbows."

She gave him a troubled glance then got into the car, squeezing in so that Marty could slam the door closed. I managed to get the Luger out of my pocket and lay it in my lap without her noticing anything. I held the gun with one hand and used the other to conceal it as best I could. Penny's eyes met mine. For the first time since we'd met, there was no hostility in them. I gave her a big wink and a ghost of a smile parted her lips.

Klinsky pulled away from the house. The car rolled on the wobbly downgrade. We turned left. Nobody talked. The outer guard came out of his booth to salute his boss. Klinsky muttered something and gave the car a shot of gas.

I jabbed Penny with my elbow, and when she looked up at me, motioned with my head for her to talk to Klinsky. The smile was a little brighter this time.

"Rex," she said, "we've got to straighten things out once and for all. How many more nights do you think we can take it?"

Her voice seemed to infuriate him. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You've got to keep those hoodlums away from me and Barney. If anything happens to Barney, I'll . . ."

He laughed. "What the hell could you do?"

"Blow the whistle so loud I'd attract the attention of the Federal Government, the Income Tax Bureau, and the U.S.

Army. This is no joke. One mark on Barney and you'll hear from me."

He was annoyed. "Next time my boys visit Barney they'll do a good job. I don't like welshers."

She bent more at the waist to speak around me. "Barney's no welsher."

"No, what do you call it?"

"If you'll only listen. I'm trying to tell you he just needs a couple days. Give him until Monday."

"What's so special about Monday?"

"He'll have the money then; that's all I know."

Klinsky shook his head. "Why the hell should I believe that crap? It's been two weeks already."

"To show good faith"—she opened her red leather bag and took out an envelope—"Barney sent you three thousand dollars."

"No good." His voice went up the scales. "I take everything or nothing."

As she grew angrier, she got calmer. "You'll have to give him until Monday. Otherwise you will get nothing."

He thought it over for a while and almost forgot to turn a curve. I hollered and slapped the wheel around. He let out a gasp and sat up straight.

I said, "One more foot and Barney'd never have to worry about making payments."

"What'll it be?" Penny said coolly.

Klinsky gave his ultimatum. "Tonight, six o'clock, my boys will come say hello to Barney. If he's got the money, he can hand it over. They'll take it and say good-by. If he hasn't got the money—every dime—they're gonna be very tough to handle."

I said, "I'll referee the fight."

Klinsky said, "The first time they lay eyes on you, Breen, they'll come back with a piece of your insides. For me, they'll do it."

"Now that we've got everything settled, suppose we stop the car near that dirt road. Right here. Sorry, Rex, but we're gonna part company."

The car rolled up to the fork in the road. "It's a big hike back, Breen. You're gonna be one sorry guy."

I leaned over and opened the door on his side. "I've been sorry a lot of times in my lifetime. But not for this." I pushed his shoulder, "Get out." I lifted the Luger. Penny made an odd sound with her mouth. I said, "Maybe I'd be better off if you never got back, then you couldn't shoot off your big mouth, give orders and shove around people like Penny and Barney. If you got a slug behind your ear even your boys would celebrate. Why shouldn't they? Wouldn't they get a Christmas present, a bigger share of the gravy?"

Penny touched my right arm. "It wouldn't settle anything."

I turned to look at her. "You're not worried about me, are you?"

She sank back into her seat. She said quietly, "They'll think Barney did it. They'll crucify him."

I turned back to Klinsky. "Get out." I slapped him across the face in a backhanded blow. "Don't you understand me?"

In a daze, he put one foot outside the car and stepped on the ground. I couldn't resist that big pair of buttocks staring up at me. I leaned back, almost in Penny's lap, planted my left foot snugly against his body and pushed. He went out quickly, sprawling into the bushes. He turned, still sitting, waved his fist at me. A tirade of foulness poured out of his mouth.

I laughed. "Knock it off, you big bum, knock it off."

I put the Luger into the glove compartment, slammed the door shut and got behind the wheel. Penny was giggling as the car shot down the road. I shook the cellophane off a cigar, stuck the weed into my mouth and chewed on it. Penny stopped giggling. A new seriousness was in her eyes. She was worried—but good!

She said, "I don't know how smart that was."

"You don't know, so why worry? How much does Barney owe Klinsky?"

She didn't hesitate. "Fifteen thousand dollars."

"Gambling, I presume."

"Blackjack and poker. Two nights. Barney could have paid it back. He'd lost more than this before and paid back. Then the Federal government decided to stick its nose into the gambling situation. Fifty dollar tax and an accounting of all activities. Any man crazy enough to pay the tax sticks his

neck out for every city cop to work on; don't pay the tax and you're in a jam with the Federal government. They've got you coming and going."

I said impatiently, "The hell with that. So Barney couldn't pay, and Klinsky sent his boys around to collect. What'll Barney do now?"

She chewed on her knuckles for a while. "He'll get it. He's got friends."

"That three grand you got in your bag, that's from friends?"

She didn't look at me. "Who else?"

"And that other twelve grand will come from other friends?"

Her lips tightened. "I don't know. Barney told me he'd have the money Monday. Barney keeps his word."

"I never knew a bookie who had fifteen thousand dollars' worth of friends. That money is mixed up with that Donahue jewelry. Barney got three thousand for turning them over to a fence. Monday he'll get the other twelve big bills."

"Excuse me," she said. "I keep forgetting I'm talking to a cop."

"I'd like to take some of that damn brass out of you."

Her lips parted, but the smile was cold. "You don't have to prove to me that you've got muscles."

I ran a finger over her face. She didn't move. I said, "Warm to the eye, cold to the touch."

"A poet. It's amazing how a guy can quote poetry at four in the morning."

"It ain't poetry." I turned into a deserted street and parked against the curb.

Her eyes glowed in the semidarkness. I said, "Don't look so happy. I wasn't parking for a muzzling party."

Her look was a challenge. "I could think of better ways to spend my time."

I was about to open the door and get out. My car was in the parking lot on 52nd Street, one block away. I changed my mind and turned toward her.

"That's what I'm gonna find out." I took her arms and pulled her close.

She looked at me with fear and resentment. "It may not be

original, buster, but if you don't let me go I'm gonna let out a scream that'll bring the cops."

At the moment it would have taken a lot more than a threat to stop me. I'd wanted to hold her like this from the first minute I'd laid eyes on her. Her lips were wet and soft. The car spun for a moment, then was still. I pulled my lips away and she sat there looking at me. She hadn't screamed. Neither had she responded. Hell, a guy couldn't have everything.

Her voice was soft, low, like a sister talking to her big brother. "Can we go now?"

I didn't answer her. I held onto the wheel and stared out the window, seeing nothing. I could feel my heart racing.

Finally I said, "Funny thing what a kiss can do to a guy. Any place but in this car and I don't think I could have stopped with a kiss."

"I don't want to hear any more. Please, Jim."

"Let me tell you before I bust."

She put her hand on my arm and looked up at my face. Her eyes looked wet. "Don't tell me anything, Jim. You've got no right to tell me anything. You had no right to kiss me like that. Please take me home."

I kicked open the door and got out. By that time she'd gone out on the sidewalk side. I closed the doors and we walked to my own car on 52nd Street without a word passing between us.

11.

I LIVED ON West 65th Street, the four-story house on the corner. I'd been living there a lot of good and bad years, ever since Mom had died ten years ago. I had a three-room furnished apartment. Sometimes I'd fix myself up a nice meal in the small kitchen, but nine times out of ten, I ate outside, where the atmosphere wasn't so dreary, where I could see people, listen to them, play a juke box.

I stopped in the corner coffee pot for a plate of bacon and eggs, two cups of coffee, and a couple rolls; then I went upstairs.

The minute I pushed my door open I should have known

something was wrong. I usually never left the fire escape window open even a few inches, not in this neighborhood where kids climbed into apartments and walked off with everything movable. I looked at the window. It was open five inches, but my tired brain could not grasp its significance.

The couch looked up at me beckoningly. I told it to wait. I got the deck of cards out of my pocket and the extra eight of clubs. At the moment I was too tired to look at cards. I opened my desk drawer and dropped them inside, then tossed in the blue chip. I locked the drawer and returned my key wallet to my hip pocket. I dropped my hat and coat across a club chair. About to go into my bedroom, I detoured to go for a drink. The kitchen clock said nine-twenty. I gulped down two glasses of water, refilled the water tumbler and returned it inside the frigidaire. I headed for the bedroom, and by the time I got there, I had my shirt and tie in my hands.

I took one step inside the room, and the ceiling came down on my head and broke into a million pieces of dirty light. I went down on hands and knees. I reached for the bed to pull myself up. Then I changed my mind and went to pick up my shirt and tie. A sob escaped my lips as the rest of the ceiling exploded before my eyes and the floor came up with a rush.

I was on the bottom of a black inkwell, trying to fight my way up to the top so I could look out. Somebody kept kicking me in the ribs. I couldn't breathe and my head and sides hurt. I curled up in a corner, hoping that sleep, that miraculous opiate, would cure my ailments.

Years later I lifted heavy eyelids. I was flat on my back, and all I could hear was someone's hoarse, irregular breathing. I lay there, wondering who was in the room with me. I held my breath and the hoarse sound stopped. I began to breathe again, and I said to hell with it, it's me, Jim Breen, doing all the inhaling and exhaling. I pushed myself up, groaning with the effort. Every part of me hurt. That dream of somebody kicking my ribs had been no part of my imagination.

I flicked on the lights and looked in the mirror, wondering why my face felt stiff as a mask. I blinked twice. Hell, my

face had looked bad enough before; now it had been changed enough to scare the daylights out of children and old women. My nose was puffed, my cheek bones ugly red bruises. Blood had run from my nose down to my neck.

The telephone began to ring. I shook my head and closed my eyes against the pain. Somebody was inside my skull, pounding my brain with a steel mallet, quickly, rhythmically. I touched the back of my head and my fingers came away sticky red.

The phone kept ringing. I swore at it, at whoever was calling me, at the guy who had messed me up.

In the kitchen I found a bottle of Four Roses containing enough whiskey for two good doses. I got a dusty glass out of the closet and took the first shot in one quick gulp. I drank half a glass of frigidaire water. The telephone had stopped ringing so I sat down on the kitchen chair and drank the rest of the booze. It went down slowly, deliciously. I squeezed the bottle but couldn't get more than another drop out of it.

On rubber legs I went back to the bedroom and sat down on the bed. The phone began to dance again. I took it off the hook. Maybe I said hello; I guess I must have said something.

"Jim? Where in hell were you? I've been trying to get you all night." It was Stanley Bender, my partner. He was a pain in the behind just now.

I said, "Where was I? Rubbing bellies with a belly dancer." I couldn't control my voice. "Maybe you don't know it, but I've been working on a jewelry heist case. I've been working all day and all night protecting our interests so we don't have to go on home relief."

"You could have called me."

"And disturb your sleep? No, sir. It's okay if my sleep gets shot to hell but God forgive me if I should ever break in on your dreams."

"I'll be in the office all day. Anything I can do to speed things up?"

"Yeh. There's something you can do. I won't have the time or the means. First: Check the pawnshops. It's a long shot, but maybe you can turn up some of the hot ice. Yeh,

yeh, I know the cops are probably doing just that, but we got men sitting on their big fat asses, not doing a damn thing. Second: Check Donahue's financial standing."

He exploded. "Who? Donahue? That family's got more money than you got hair on your body. For cryin' out loud!"

"Check it. It's probably a waste of time but I just want to make sure. That's all. Now I'm going to sleep."

He hollered something but I hung up on him. I sat there for a long minute but my mind was in a whirl. It kept going back to the phony card. What significance did it have, if any? I'd showed it around, hoping for a bite, hoping somebody like Rex Klinsky would make an attempt to buy it, hoping for something. And all I'd got for my efforts was a beating.

I wondered what the guy who'd sapped me had wanted. Maybe he wanted the pleasure of kicking me around and stepping on my face. I could think of a couple people who'd enjoy nothing better. Or the guy could have been a sneak thief whose feelings I'd hurt when I'd interrupted him. But the house looked undisturbed and, besides, a sneak thief has a yellow streak running down his back. When disturbed all he can think of is to run like hell. He'd never take time out to play a song on my ribs.

I looked for my keys. They were in my hip pocket all right. I opened the desk drawer. The full deck of cards was still there. So was the eight of clubs and the blue chip. About to slam the drawer closed, I changed my mind and took out the eight of clubs. In my desk I found a paperweight, a hemisphere of magnifying glass which would do as well as the magnifier I'd left in the car. I ran the chunk of glass over the card. As if it had been made by vanishing ink, the dot had disappeared. It figured, for this card was too new and shiny; it had come out of a fresh deck. I opened the full deck and examined the backs. I hadn't expected to find any extra markings, and I didn't.

Sitting at my desk, my eyelids became heavy. I closed them, and the next thing I knew, it was four o'clock in the afternoon and I had a terrible stiff neck from sleeping in a cramped position. I wanted to crawl into my bed. I could have used a lot more sleep, but I had work to do.

I washed, dressed and trotted downstairs for coffee. Fifteen minutes later, I crawled into my car. Something hard and cold jammed into the back of my neck, and Puggy's cracked voice said, "What kept you so long?"

I sat frozen, immobile.

An open hand slapped against my right ear, stinging. "I oughtta beat the crap out of you."

Long legs came over the seat and Marty sat down beside me. "Start driving," he said. "Puggy's got a big cannon pointed right at your big head in case you're interested. If you don't care, just try some funny business like running us up a tree or something like that. You keep the car under forty-five per. The second you go over forty-five you get a slug right in the ear. Now drive!"

I drove.

12.

REX KLINSKY was sitting at the same desk, wearing the same undertaker's suit and, for all I knew, was chewing on the same cigar. His eyes took me in, inch by inch, and a satisfied little flicker hurried across his face. He took the cigar out of his fat mouth and leaned back in his chair.

Marty jabbed his elbow into my side. "You deaf? The boss said for you to sit down."

The tautness of anger grew in my throat. Suddenly I didn't give a damn. If I had to get it, this room was as good a place as any. And if Klinsky didn't plan to dispose of me at the moment, what I had to do wouldn't make a bit of difference. Either way I had nothing to lose.

I kicked out. Marty's lips grew gray and thin and hard as he clutched his groin and toppled forward. I ducked away from Puggy's right fist and hooked my left hand into his belly. He toppled back and grunted. A look of surprise lit up his pock-marked face. He took a step forward, nostrils flaring with anger. Changing his mind, he fumbled for his gun in the shoulder holster.

Klinsky jumped up. "No, Puggy!"

"You seen what the sonofabitch done to Marty."

He glanced down at Marty, writhing in pain on the floor.

"Take him outside before he gets sick and stinks up my rug."

Puggy glared at me, venom in his eyes. "Next time you'll get it good. He leaned over Marty. "C'mon, Marty, get up. Marty, we gotta get out of here." Marty groaned, saliva appearing on his lips. "Marty, the boss says—"

Klinsky yelled. "Take him by the collar and get him out. He throws up on my rug, you'll lick off every drop so help me."

"Please, Marty," Puggy begged. Deciding that talking was of no use, he got a firm grip on Marty's collar and dragged him across the floor. When he got to the door, Klinsky had it open.

I sat down, too tired to stand.

"You said something about a crooked game," Klinsky said at last. I stared at him, wondering if he was kidding me. But he looked at me with a quiet level glance. "I gotta know if it's true."

I bit into my cigar. "You should know; you run the games."

He exploded. "I run the games? Like a general behind the lines, I should know what's doing with my sergeants? Rex Klinsky never ran an iced game in his life. Never. There's no percentage in it." His voice held a menacing note. "I got to find out if such a thing is true. It couldn't be, I'm sure, but maybe you got something. I gotta know one way or the other."

I shifted in my seat. "Why?"

I'd insulted him again. "Why? I gotta find out who is responsible. I gotta learn him never to do such a thing again. I make money, good money. I pay high taxes to the cops. My relatives, my friends, they make a living from these games. And what keeps these games going? People who know Rex is on the up-and-up."

"People will gamble regardless. Like the guy who played in a game he knew was crooked but couldn't help it because it was the only game in town, people will play for the thrill of it."

"Maybe," he conceded. "Maybe I'd get the nuts out here, instead of the mink and tux trade. People who play here know they can get a fair break for their dough. Every day

a guy walks out with a bundle of moola. And if a winner wants protection, I give him a guard to take him home."

"Frank Sanders didn't win a big bundle and get rolled for it?"

He glared at me. "What the hell you talkin' about? Sanders never won more than a couple of grand in his life. Why? Because he's strictly a poker player and don't know his ass from a hole in the ground. The guy's a phony. A bum who digs up money some place and comes here to lose it. Twice I chased him, told him I wasn't interested in his trade. But he comes back, and you know me, Big Hearted Rex Klinsky. I let him stay. What's this gotta do with the phony game?"

"Sanders is the boy who got took. Or maybe he tried to recoup his losses. Any chance of a guy getting his hands on one of your decks, then bringing it back into the game at some future date?"

He rolled his lips as if he had a sour mouthful and didn't know what to do with it. He made a motion to lay his cigar in the tray but changed his mind.

"Every deck we use comes from that cabinet over there. Nobody gets into that cabinet except me and my boys."

"You gave me a deck."

"So what'll you do with it? Mark it and bring it into a game with you? You think you're dealing with dopes? Like I told you, my boys take a couple of decks from that cabinet when we get enough hands for a game. We use those decks. Soon as we break the seal, we give them a good once-over for marks. And my boys are experts at spotting phony cards, believe me. So what can you do with your phony deck? Palm our cards and substitute yours?" He smiled derisively. "We got two guys with guns up on platforms watching every game to keep the players and housemen honest; we got the housemen watching, too, and, to top it off, their eyes are always looking for marks on the cards. Some crooks like to make nail marks on different cards. The minute he spots a mark, our houseman tears up the deck and gets a new one. No, sir. Nobody rooks Rex Klinsky."

I put my cigar in the tray and folded my hands on my lap. "Then, if that's true, somebody in this joint robbed Frank Sanders. And don't tell me your houseman can't take

one of your decks out of the cabinet, slip it into his pocket, and use a cold deck he's carrying around in the other pocket. Hell, nobody checks on *him*."

He chewed on his lower lip with the effort of concentration. He nodded slowly. "That can be, except I got honest boys working for me. How do you know Sanders got robbed? Explain it, mister, or so help me, I'll rip you apart. I don't like it when somebody tells me I don't run honest games. Prove it."

I looked him in the eye. His glance didn't waver. I said, "What difference does it make now?"

He pounded the desk with a flat hand. "I gotta know. Prove to me any game was crooked and I'll give you a thousand dollars."

"You got your proof."

He stared, puzzled. "I got what?"

"The marked card, the eight of clubs I found in Sanders' flat, the card that came from one of your decks, the card you or your boys took from me—that's your proof."

He seemed more puzzled than ever. "Too bad Rex never went to school and learned your language. You talking about that eight of clubs I had layin' on this desk, the one I took out of your pocket? That card was a phony?"

"Somebody slugged me in my apartment this morning and took that card. I don't know who else was interested in that card outside of you."

He snapped, "If I got the card, why should I bring you here?"

"You tell me."

"Why should I worry about one lousy card you found someplace?"

"If somebody examined that card, and word got around that it came from your game, and you couldn't deny the back design was identical with your cards, your reputation would get kind of soiled. That's why you might grab the evidence. Without it, I could make speeches on Broadway and 42nd Street and people'd laugh and throw me pennies."

He thought that over for a while. His eyes glanced around the room, then came back to me. "Could be you made up this story? Maybe you're lying a little bit?"

"If it makes you feel better, have it your way."

"I gotta know," he pleaded.

I said, "I told you the truth every bit of it."

He sighed. "Okay, I believe you. You beat it. Don't look so worried. I'll give the word so you won't be molested."

"How do I know Marty and Puggy won't get other ideas?"

"You don't. You'll just have to take my word for it."

I spit on the floor. "You should live so long, pal. Get my car."

The thin hard smile never left his face as he made the call to have my car ready in front. He was as cool as a chunk of ice as I followed him outside, down the four steps. He stopped short, looked around, still cool and dangerous. Two men crossed the road, short, gnomelike figures slithering along in the twilight dusk. Klinsky called out and one of the men stopped short and looked around.

I jammed the gun into Klinsky's back. "Go ahead, *be* a dead hero."

He called out. "Kim, Bella's looking for you. Where you been hiding?"

Heller came close enough for me to recognize him. "She gives me a pain," he said. His eyes moved suspiciously from Klinsky to me. "Where you going, boss, on another trip?" He backed away.

I brought the revolver around, pointed it in Heller's direction. "Looks like it's gonna be kind of crowded in my car. Stand there!"

Heller kept backing away. "Up yours!" he cried. "Take him, Marty."

At the same instant I heard the footsteps behind me. I ducked and whirled. Marty's gun was just coming out of his holster. I pumped two bullets before he could point the gun. His eyes opened wide, a look of surprise on his face. He grabbed at his belly and fell to the ground.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Klinsky's right arm come around. I ducked under it and slammed the revolver against the side of his head. He grunted something and dropped to his hands and knees. Two men were running down the road, little men with big shotguns. Heller, babbling something I couldn't understand, was motioning them on.

I yanked open the car door and dived in. Bullets began to whistle round the car. Cold tension centered in my stomach and pulled at my windpipe. I prayed the car wouldn't stall. It never had before, but there was always a first time. The windshield seemed to jump before my eyes, and a million cracks ran away from a hole in the center. I gave her the gas and the car shot down the incline onto the gravel road, rolling like a drunk about to keel over. The cracks in the windshield suddenly opened wide and half the windshield disappeared without a sound.

The car made the curve on two wheels and, abruptly, the shooting stopped. How the slugs had missed me was a miracle brought about by my prayer. It couldn't have been anything else. The rear glass was shattered and there were holes in the car metal. A couple of inches lower, and I would have stopped a couple of slugs. I jammed down my foot. I had to get away, far away. I didn't hear any sound behind me, but I turned to look anyway. A black sedan was crawling up on me. It had its lights on, big lights. They were like monstrous eyes, malicious and mocking, telling me I couldn't get away, yet daring me to.

I turned on my lights. In a few seconds I approached the outer guard. My lights hit him so suddenly, the breath caught in my throat. He stood in the center of the road, a sub-machine gun pointed right at my car. Obviously a telephone call from the main house had alerted him.

I flattened my face against the wheel. The staccato sound of the machine gun sounded loud and sickening. The wheel danced out of my hand. My head came up quickly. The car was headed for the bushes and, behind them, the trees. I grabbed the wheel and spun it. The front wheels kissed the bushes, then came back onto the road. I straightened myself out and took a deep breath.

13.

THE BLACK SEDAN was four lengths behind me now. I hunched over the wheel. The speedometer crept up to eighty, eighty-five, ninety. The car quivered, threatening to fall apart. The black sedan dropped back a length, then inched

closer. The monstrous eyes were laughing now.

There were signs of traffic. A car loomed suddenly in front of me. I went around it, my tires screaming in protest. More traffic. My speedometer told me I'd slowed down to seventy, then sixty-five. A lot more traffic. I had to slow down. The black sedan was having the same trouble. Now ahead of me was a straight line of cars, at least six between me and the sedan. I wished there were hundreds. We were riding leisurely now, forty miles an hour. No strain on the car but plenty of strain on me.

Traffic rolled along. The moon came out, then a couple stars to keep it company. I looked for a place and the chance to get off the road without the people in the black sedan catching wise. Riding this road, sooner or later, there'd be a traffic jam, or, further on, a stop for a red light; then I'd have company. There was no rule that said the people in the black sedan wouldn't leave the car and join me in mine. I picked up the revolver on the seat beside me and stuck the nozzle inside my belt. The first guy who showed his head near this car would catch a slug.

Ahead of me, the road sloped then rose again. Just before the rise there was a fork, a dirt road to the right. I was ready for it. I stepped hard on the gas and turned right. It couldn't have taken me more than five seconds from the time I left the main highway until the curve in the dirt road hid me from view. But, like bloodhounds, they stuck to my trail.

I swore at myself for leaving the main highway. There I had a chance. Shooting might bring help. Not from the average citizen who didn't like trouble and minded what he called his own business, but there might be a prowler car in the neighborhood and the noise of gunfire might bring it. Here in this semidarkness and total absence of people, hollering for help would get me nothing but a sore throat. I touched the revolver. Four live bullets—four shots that could stop four guys.

The black sedan was gaining rapidly. One length behind, the car was visible enough for me to see faces; they were grim and taut. Puggy was at the wheel, Heller alongside him. In the back were two men, vague figures, strangers. The

back door of the sedan opened and a man's head came out, then his hands. I hunched closer to the wheel as the shotgun roared and echoed in the distance like summer thunder.

"Stop!" The man cried. "I'll blast you to hell."

I was three-quarters of a length ahead. The front wheels of the sedan were hugging my left rear tire. Now it was half a length behind. The shotgun came up again. I slowed for a few seconds and jammed down the brake. The wheel slammed into my chest, knocking my breath up into my throat. I saw stars and funny, dirty lights, and shook my head to clear it.

The black sedan had shot past me. I skidded a dozen yards before I stopped. In split seconds, I reversed the car, went back a hundred yards to where the road was wider and I could make a turn with safety. The black sedan had stopped and was going in reverse when I straightened out the car and pulled away. The bastards still had to catch me. They still had to get near enough to take me. And I still had a beautiful, shiny revolver with four beautiful slugs that could make them change their ugly minds.

And suddenly a rickety car, one that looked like a Model T Ford, loomed up ahead of me. A crash seemed inevitable. He honked his horn. He was telling me to get off the road. To my left the road sloped sharply into a ravine. I could crash into the Ford or try running my car down the sharply sloping side of the road. He kept honking his horn and coming on. I jammed on the brake and turned to the left. The car lurched. Pebbles slammed against the metal of the car. For one sickening instant the car and I hung in the air, then I was in the rolling barrel at Steeplechase and I couldn't straighten myself out.

I landed with a jar that slammed my knees into my stomach. Nausea swept around me like a gray blanket, swathing my head in clinging folds. My stomach heaved and turned. I closed my eyes. I wanted to just lie there and die. Nothing mattered, nothing and nobody. When I opened my eyes somebody was waving a hot flame nearer and nearer my face. I turned my head and the flame licked at my hair. I cried out for him to cut it out and, even as I opened my mouth, I realized I was in the upended car, and the dashboard above

me was belching flames.

In slow motion, I turned around onto my belly. I crawled to the rear, away from the flames and the heat. I lay there for a couple of seconds, trying to catch my breath. All the strength had drained out of me. After a while, I reached over for the door handle, turned and pushed. It wouldn't budge. On my knees I swung around to the other door. The door opened smoothly and easily. Flames bit into the seat and ran along the top binding like a fiery insect.

I stumbled out on grass and dirt and dropped flat on my face. The ground was soft and cold under me. I lifted my head. On hands and knees, I moved a few feet away from the burning car. I heard voices from up the incline tough, strident voices. Kim Heller had found me.

Fifteen feet ahead I saw the tree trunk. Grass and stubs of plants were around it. I dug my nails into the ground and made five feet, then five more. The voices were louder now. A sob came out of my mouth as I pulled myself up and crawled to the tree trunk. With every inch, my guts were being yanked apart, but I managed to get around the trunk. I rolled over on my back and looked up at the sky, pale blue, peaceful.

I didn't have to look to know the car was a mass of fire. I could hear the noise made by the hungry flames, I could smell the acrid fumes.

Heller's voice sounded startlingly near. "That's not a bad way to go. Fast and certain."

Puggy said, "Not me. If I gotta go, I wanna die in bed with a couple of blondes."

A man laughed. "C'mon, let's get out of here. You'll have a million people here soon."

Heller gloated. "Let 'em come. We're having a bonfire celebration. Always wanted to see a guy burn."

No guy had the right to be that happy. "So long, bastard," I muttered. "I'll see you again."

A long while later, I got up on my feet. People were up on the dirt road. Two men started to slide down. On rubbery legs, I walked in the opposite direction, then made a half-circle back to the dirt road. In fifteen minutes I was on the main road. I stood there trying to bum a ride. People looked

out at me but drove on. I looked me over. One jacket sleeve hung like a giant tassel, my pants were torn at the knees. I didn't have to look to know my face could scare Dracula.

I emptied my jacket pockets and flung the jacket off the road. I pushed back my hair and began to use my thumb again. Five minutes later a couple of Marines in a Ford gave me a lift into town. They were curious, and when I explained I'd practiced some Army maneuvers, on account of some day I expected to get drafted, they looked at each other and then stared straight ahead. In town I headed for the nearest doctor's office. The doc decorated me with yards of adhesive to keep two ribs in place, and doused me liberally with iodine.

14.

BEFORE I COULD get up to my apartment, my landlady, came out into the hall. She took one look at me and began to roll her eyes. I grabbed her arm as she moaned and made ready to keel over. She shook me off.

"Mr. Breen, you've been hurt." That's what people call an understatement. "Bless me, what did you run into?"

I patted her arm. "You should see the truck that hit me. Excuse me, but I better go upstairs and get some clothes on before I get locked up for indecent exposure."

Upstairs, I ripped off the rest of my shirt, shrugged off my underwear, slowly and easily, and began to kick off my shoes. I had a one-track mind. I wanted sleep, and I was going to get it. The hell with diamonds and jewelry and hoods with big shotguns.

There was a pounding on the door. I groaned but the pounding didn't stop. I glanced at my wrist watch. The glass was smashed but the second hand was still going. It was ten-thirty. The pounding threatened to knock the door down.

A rough voice said, "Open up, Breen, or it'll cost you the price of a new door." It was Lieutenant McCarthy.

"Okay," I hollered. "Keep your pants buttoned."

I unhooked the latch and opened the door. McCarthy had no surprise in his eyes as he looked me over. His partner

smiled smugly. McCarthy introduced him. Detective Phillips was a tall, thin man with dark eyes blinking behind horn-rimmed glasses. He looked at my taped ribs and clucked sympathetically. McCarthy rocked on his feet.

I closed the door. McCarthy scowled fiercely. I said, "You can't be that sore, Mac."

He snapped. "Okay, wise guy, sit down and answer me a couple questions. Leave out all the crap."

"If you'll tell me what's bothering you . . ."

"For instance, your trip to Klinsky's joint. How does the Donahue heist job connect with Klinsky?"

I give him a brief smile. "Intuition. You know how we women are."

"You won't find it so funny. You're in a helluva jam."

"Now you've got me crying. What you gonna book me for?"

A grin of sadistic delight made him look almost handsome. "For murder. And I can make out a *prima facie* case."

"You know I didn't kill Sanders."

His eyebrows lifted. "I wasn't talking about Sanders."

I felt the hair rise on my neck. I grinned. "Maybe you're enjoying this suspense; I'm not."

He waved his hand in a gesture of disgust. "Suspense, my foot. I think you know damn well who was murdered."

I took a deep breath. "No, you tell me."

"All right, Breen, let's have the details." He talked in a low, soothing voice. "From the beginning. Your outfit was notified that the Donahue jewelry was heisted. Go on from there."

"I got a phone call that Sanders was a front for a jewel gang."

"Cut!" he cried. His voice, still soft and low, held a different nose. "You've skipped Barney Malin."

New York has the best police force in the world. Occasionally, they'll flounder around, but nine times out of ten they'll work things out. I wondered aloud how they ever got wise to Barney Malin.

McCarthy said, "Let me ask the questions." He shook a finger in my direction. "I'm tired of this horseplay. Give me the answers or I'm taking you down to headquarters. I swear by my father, you won't get out until we break this

case. Do you tell me about Malin?"

I told him about Barney Malin, how once we'd palled together, how the tattoo identification and the general description of the heister had jibed with Barney Malin's physical characteristics. I told McCarthy how I'd talked to Malin and found nothing.

He gave me a strained, sardonic glance. "Damn it, Breen, if you had come to us, there's a good chance you'd have the stolen jewelry by now. But you had to be a wise guy. Now you'll sweat it out. Maybe you'll get the stuff back. I got a feeling it's so far away you'll never see it again. Not that I give a damn. I'm interested in homicide. And I got two murders to worry about."

"You worked on Malin?"

McCarthy shoved back his hat, the easier to scratch his head. "Malin's disappeared. It's a good bet he's down in Mexico peddling Mrs. Donahue's jewelry. Let's get on with the story. You left Malin's place and visited Mrs. Donahue. From there you went to Sanders' flat. How come Sanders?"

"I got this telephone call—"

McCarthy slapped his thigh and jumped up. "That does it. Get your clothes on and let's go for a ride."

"You're locking me up?"

"Get your clothes on. We got work to do, a lot of work."

I didn't move. "First, I got to know where you're taking me. If it's headquarters, I want to make a call."

"I'm taking you to the morgue," he said crossly. "I want you to take a good look at a corpse. After that, where you go depends on you and your cockeyed story. Before you get dressed, you can give me that blue chip and the playing card you had on you up in Sanders' flat. And don't give me any crap about how you found them in a subway train."

15.

I FOLLOWED A MAN from the medical examiner's office down the spiral stairway and into the large rectangular room. Behind us, a piece of cigar clenched in his strong yellow teeth, came McCarthy and Phillips.

The air had a faintly sweet odor. The walls and floor were a dirty cement color, almost brown. Three windows ran the length of one side of the room; rows of big drawers ranged along the opposite side. The man from the medical examiner's office squinted at the drawers and moved slowly toward the far end of the room. He found the number he sought, shoved a paper into his hip pocket, and began to pull out the drawer.

The drawer kept coming until I thought it would never stop, and with every inch the knot in my stomach got tighter and tighter. Maybe it was funny—a big guy like me getting sick to his stomach because he was going to look at a corpse. It was just that I kept thinking that not many hours before, this body had been alive, blood pulsating through every vein.

There was a touch of sarcasm in McCarthy's voice. "Whatsamatter, Breen, you scared of a stiff? C'mon, big brave man, take a look."

"You talk too goddam much, Mac." In a half daze, eyes fixed on a yellow polka dot on Phillips' tie, I moved closer.

The medical examiner's man said, "Come over on this side."

Uneasy tension grew under my skin. What the devil was I stalling for? Hell, she was dead. There was nothing I could do now. And she meant nothing to me. She was just somebody I'd liked in a detached sort of way, somebody I'd become acquainted with in my line of work. The tightness inside me grew worse and my legs moved jerkily.

I looked down at the body, covered to the neck with a cheap yellow muslin. The hair was black, the nose thin, aristocratic. The face looked fuller, as if she had a mouthful of cotton. Across the forehead ran an ugly red line. Without looking I knew a similiar red line ran from the neck down past the breasts through the navel, right to the groin. An autopsy had been performed and the body was sewed up.

McCarthy said, "You gonna stand there all day?"

"They didn't waste much time," I had a curious ache in my throat. "Give the butchers a body and they start cutting it open. Take it away."

Phillips laughed. "Look at his puss. A big guy like him.

Can't take it, these big fellers . . ."

"Shut up a minute," McCarthy said to him. "Breen, you can identify the body?"

I walked to the doorway, stood there a few seconds, and heard the big drawer close behind me. I said, "Don't tell me you don't know who that was?"

McCarthy growled. "I am telling you. Why you think we brought you here?"

I shrugged. "Maybe you were trying to put a scare in me. Maybe you tried to tell me, what happened to her, could happen to me."

I felt his hot breath on my neck. "She had a page out of a telephone book in her change purse. That's all we found on her, a change purse inside her suit pocket, also a couple of labels we couldn't trace in ten years. Nothing else, not even a laundry mark. Nothing else on her."

I said, "And, lo and behold, when the page was opened, there in big letters was the name James Breen. My name, address and telephone number."

He fairly gloated, took my arm and led me up the ladder. "You betcha sweet ass it was your name, and circled with a lead pencil for emphasis." He steered me into a room, a bare room except for two chairs, a steel file and a battered table. "Sit down, Breen. Make yourself comfortable."

He yanked open a window. A cool breeze blew in from outside but the room temperature was high, the air stifling.

McCarthy said, "Who is she? And if you give me that amnesia routine again, I'll shove you down the cellar in headquarters and personally beat the daylights out of you. Now talk, damn you."

I patted my pockets, ran a dry tongue over drier lips. I looked up at Phillips, who sat with his legs wide apart, a fresh cigar between his teeth. Without a word, he got a cigar out of his inside pocket, handed it to me. I sniffed the cigar.

I said, "Never knew a cop who couldn't afford good cigars. How you boys do it on your salary?" McCarthy swore savagely. I smiled up at him. "Just let me get organized, huh, Mac. She was a nice dame. Don't ask me why. Whoever did it, I'd like to see him get the business."

Softly, "Whoever did what?"

"Whoever murdered her."

Still softly, "Any reason you assume she was murdered?"

I took a light from Phillips' lighter and sucked in smoke. I said, "You told me so back in my apartment. You were talking about her, not some tramp from Oshkosh. Anyway, dames like that don't die from hardening of the arteries."

McCarthy grunted, moved away from me. "She was found in the river, stuck between the pier and a freighter. The medical examiner says death was due to drowning, and that she'd been dead a couple hours when some merchant marine feller spied the body. There was a bruise on the back of her head. Just a big lump that could have been caused by the pilings when she jumped in. That's what the examiner figures—she jumped in. I would have seconded his motion in a minute except for that telephone page. With you mixed up in it, the circumstances of her death were suspicious. So I hollered for the autopsy. Who is she, Breen?"

I bit hard on the cigar. "The cops from the robbery squad can identify her. They've seen her, talked to her."

"She's mixed up in the Donahue case?"

"Marie Stanton, Donahue's sister."

He grinned. "That ties it up. Marie Stanton, the dame that kept Sanders from getting too lonely. The landlady's description was pretty good. First Sanders, then this girl. It fits beautifully. We gotta get our hands on Barney Malin. We gotta sweat him out of hiding. Once we get our hands on him, we'll rip his ass off. He'll talk his little heart out. Three people—three of 'em—that's the whole case."

I spit out a mouthful of brown, sour saliva. "Marie Stanton, Frank Sanders and Barney Malin."

"Two and one make three: pretty good addition. The girl gave her lover-boy a tip on when and where the Donahue collection would be available for pickup. But he's got no guts to do it alone—"

I interrupted him. "Mr. and Mrs. Donahue knew Sanders. He couldn't just walk in on them. Mask or no mask, they'd recognize him."

He slapped the table a resounding whack. "Which makes the addition perfect. Sanders contacts Malin to do the job."

Eighty thousand dollars' worth of jewelry cut three ways. That's the setup. How much did you offer Malin for the jewelry, Breen? A fence would have given him fifteen, maybe twenty grand. You must've bid twenty-five or thirty."

"I offered him eighty," I mocked him. "I wanted the stuff real bad. I offered him nothing. Does that statement rate a trip to that headquarters cellar?"

He ignored me. "After the heist job, Malin handed the ice to Sanders for disposal. Then you come with your offer." I opened my mouth and he cried, "Shut up, I don't care to hear from the man in the balcony. Just sit still and listen." He glared at me, a challenging look in his eyes. "So Malin gets hungry. Why cut the ice three ways for peanuts? He gets after Sanders, knocks him off—after a little trouble—and grabs the whole take for himself."

I tried to make smoke rings but failed.

He took a turn around the room. "Marie Stanton is no fool. When she gets wise that Sanders is dead, she knows who did the bumping. She needs help. She can't talk to Barney Malin, so she tries to contact you, figuring maybe the two of you can make some kind of deal. She figures she'll tip you off about the jewels, and you'll pay for the tip. Only Malin got her before she could contact you.

"After failing to get you on the phone, she could have threatened Malin, hoping he'd break down and share the loot with her. So she gives Malin this ultimatum and gets a permanent ducking for her pains. That make sense to you?"

Maybe his theory was correct. And maybe he was all wet. If Malin had killed Sanders and had taken full possession of the jewelry, why hadn't he let me take them off his hands for thirty thousand dollars? Unless he was scared I'd blow the whistle on him for murder.

I spit tobacco juice on the stone floor. "Why worry yourself about my opinion?"

"I'd just like to get your reaction."

I studied his face, shifted my gaze to Phillips, who looked bored with the whole thing.

I said, "You're putting your partner to sleep. Which reminds me, I need some shut eye."

He said, sincerity in his voice and manner, "I'm asking

you to work with us. You want the jewelry; we want Malin. Hell, you never heard anything fairer than that."

I watched him through a smoke screen. "It's too damn fair, Mac. In fact, there's a gimmick somewhere in your high-sounding words."

"You're a smart man, Breen. I like to work with brainy guys."

My nose twitched. "Stop crapping me, Mac; I'm very sensitive. I'm not a smart man. I'm just a plugger who keeps plugging until something breaks, then dives through the opening and hopes he'll come up with the right answer. You don't want me for my brains. You don't want me for my muscle. In fact, you wish I'd go back home, except you got an idea Malin will contact me for some ready cash."

He snapped triumphantly, "So you did offer him a deal?"

I lifted my eyebrows. "Who said anything about offers? I talked to him. I reminded him we used to be friends. There's a chance he might want to prove his friendship by giving me the jewels."

"For a consideration."

"Naturally. Friendship can go only so far, then you got to depend on the greenbacks."

He leaned over, so he could make his plea. "Okay, that's what I figured. And it makes sense. He'll need money to get out of town. So he'll get in touch with you. When he does, we want him. No monkey business. So help me, you'll be in the jam of your life if you become an accessory or if you aid or abet his escape in any shape, manner, or form."

I couldn't look him in the eye. "What happens if you pick up Malin before he contacts me?"

He emphasized his words by slapping his right fist into his left palm. "We want him for murder; the robbery squad wants him for the heist job. We work hand in hand. When we grab Malin, we'll let the robbery squad take over. You get back the stolen stuff. That'll make everybody happy."

"Except Barney Malin."

"He murdered two people."

"That's only theory. The medical examiner said Marie Stanton committed suicide."

He laughed. "What do you want the guy to do, stick his

neck out? He thinks it's suicide because there isn't a bump on her body except for that head bruise. But for a broad so damned anxious to contact you all afternoon, I just can't see her getting discouraged enough to kill herself. You wouldn't know why she wanted to contact you?"

I shrugged. "She might have got a lead on the jewels."

"She could have come to us, unless she was so deeply implicated in the robbery, she would be putting herself behind bars for a lot of years. You, of course, would pay her for the tip, kiss her good-by, and send her on her sweet way."

I flung the cigar into a corner. Phillips walked over to it and ground it with his heel. Slowly, as if it were an effort, he came back to us and plunked himself into the other chair.

I looked up at McCarthy. "Mac, I got a confession to make. Maybe Malin did kill Sanders; maybe he killed Marie Stanton. But I got a better case against Marie Stanton. I could be wrong."

His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You trying to befog the facts? Sanders hired Malin—"

"You said that, Mac, and I'm not arguing any of it, except that I can make out a fair case of suicide as far as Marie Stanton is concerned. You say Malin killed her. I say maybe."

"Why should Marie Stanton knock herself off?"

"You wouldn't believe it, Mac, but some people have what is called a conscience. Marie Stanton was a jumpy, nervous kind of individual, the kind that a guilty conscience would work into a good case of hysteria and depression. Marie couldn't take it any longer, so she tried to unburden her mind, figuring her soul would be cleansed and she'd feel better. Only I wasn't around."

He snickered. "So she killed herself. She could have talked a jury out of a conviction for robbery and she knew it."

"She didn't care about the jury. She couldn't talk her conscience into an acquittal. That was worse. Anyway, I'm not talking about robbery. Murder, Mac—I'm talking about a case of homicide."

"You trying to pin the Sanders murder on her?"

I wished I had my cigar back. I looked around at Phillips.

He was dozing, his clasped palms over his belly.

I said, "Just an idea, Mac, a lousy idea, but one you've got to consider. Let me unburden my own conscience. That night Sanders was killed, I was coming out of the Donahue house when Marie drove up in a cab. She was in a state bordering on panic. I talked to her for a few minutes. She kept her handbag clutched tightly to her. I'm a nosy kind of guy, so I got her bag open."

"What was in it?"

"A .32 caliber Colt revolver stinking from cordite, with six empty shells in the chamber."

He stared at me, his forehead wrinkled. "So you shook her a little and out popped Sanders' name."

"I got the name all right but she didn't admit killing him. There's no doubt in my mind that she had the murder gun."

When he quieted down for a second, I butted in. "How did I know that gun had been used to kill a guy? She could have been shooting rats down by the dock. Besides, it was none of my business. In fact, I still think so."

He growled something profane as his gaze hit Phillips, dozing peacefully in the chair. Putting his mouth close to Phillips' ear, McCarthy let out a howl that brought Phillips up on his feet, reaching for his gun. Phillips' hand stopped short of his hip. He looked at McCarthy, then at me. McCarthy glared at him, then decided to pay attention to me.

I said, "You got a better case against her than Barney Malin. The circumstances, the opportunity, the motive could have been anything."

"For instance?"

"She, instead of Malin, got hungry for a bigger share of the jewelry. But for a gal who was the sister of a rich guy like Donahue, what in hell did she want to make a Judas and a pig out of herself?"

He took a look at Phillips, who had sat down and was going back to his dreams. "Donahue has dough, sure. But that doesn't make his sister financially independent. My idea is she helped her lover swipe the jewelry as a sign of her love for him. It's happened before. A bum gets a nice girl to commit crimes for him, helps him cheat, helps him rob—even her own folks. Marie Stanton could have killed him for

something that had nothing to do with the jewelry. Jealousy has been responsible for more than one murder. I'd like to get Malin in a closed room. In five minutes I'd know all the details. The whole damn case is tied up with that jewelry heist. That's how I figure it. Now more than ever, I'm sure that dame never killed herself. Maybe she killed Sanders; you make out a good case. But I think Malin found her and knocked her off. Malin is the boy we want. Malin has the jewelry. He's the key to the whole mess."

I got up. "I'm a very tired guy, Mac."

His grunt was softer this time. "Okay, okay. You can beat it. First, do we work together on this?"

I nodded. "You know me, I always co-operate with the cops."

He said, "Okay, then plunk yourself in your apartment. You cover the telephone. I'll work on the outside."

I smiled. "Of course, Mac. Anything you say."

He smiled right back. "It's safer that way. Then nobody will go banging you around the ribs. Who gave you that beating?"

I looked surprised. "You mean what truck hit me?"

He took the blue chip out of his pocket, flipped it and caught it over his shoulder. "Yeah," he said softly, "that's what I mean."

16.

I WENT HOME, bolted the door and slipped the telephone off the hook. I got out of my clothes. I must have got into bed, because that's where I woke up in the morning, but for the life of me I had no recollection of entering the bedroom.

The knocking sound came from miles away, soft as a leaf on a breeze. I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling. The knocking was louder, demanding.

I sat up in bed. The sun lay in a gold bar across my naked thighs. I swung around and fumbled for my slippers. The electric clock said nine-thirty, and except for a dull ache along my lower rib and a burning, smarting feeling around my nose and lips, I felt pretty good. I shrugged into my

robe. Whoever was making all that noise was pretty stubborn.

I hollered, "You don't have to knock down the door. What's the password?"

Klinsky was still alive, and he still had a crew working for him.

"Please, Jim, it's me—Penny."

For a second I thought I was back dreaming, or that my ears were playing tricks. I opened the door and she stood in the doorway. I must have had an odd look on my face for, as she came in, she said, "I know you're angry because I disturbed you."

"I'm still in bed, dreaming a beautiful blonde has come to wake me."

She wouldn't even smile. "Please, Jim, it's Barney. I'm worried."

I walked to the table, where I found a cigar. "He's disappeared," I said, "and you don't know where he's gone." She nodded. I said, "Doesn't the bum know enough to get in touch with his bedroom partner so she wouldn't worry about him?"

She gasped. "I see you got out on the wrong side of the bed. I'm sorry if I troubled you."

"So am I. So Barney's disappeared. What am I supposed to do? Wave a magic wand so he can come back to bed with you?"

She flushed. "I came to you because you're the only one who can help me find Barney. There's no one else I can talk to."

"The cops have big ears; they'll listen."

She clasped her hands under her chin as if she were praying. "The cops will stick Barney behind bars and throw away the key."

I knew I was hollering, but I couldn't help it. "Who the hell gives a damn? If I get Barney I'm liable to break his back and then hand him over to the cops. If that dumb cluck had listened to me when I first spoke to him, he wouldn't be in this lousy spot."

She went to the door. "Forget I asked you. I should have known better."

"Maybe he wants to be left alone."

"I've got to take that chance."

"Didn't he try to get in touch with you at all?"

She shook her head. "No. It could be because he knows the police must be watching the building and tapping our phone. Her eyes were soft and troubled. "Or he could be on the bottom of the river, or in some gully. I read about Marie Stanton in this morning's paper. And I had the craziest premonition that Barney is dead too."

I snickered. "Crazy is right. Barney is healthy as an ox. Who knows, by now he may be taking a sun bath in Mexico. Wouldn't it be funny if he left you to pay the rent on his apartment?"

She said simply, "I just want to know that Barney is all right. After that . . . it doesn't matter. I was going to leave him anyway. Barney knows that. I told him I couldn't stay with him any longer."

"Why? You get tired of that mattress?"

Her voice rose. "You big strong nasty man, I hate you. Damn you, saying things like that. What did I ever do to you to make you want to hurt me every time we get together. If I were a man, I'd slam that sneer down your throat." She yanked the door open. "And you can go to—"

I grabbed her arm. "First we'll find Barney. Then you can tell me some more."

She blinked away the tears as she thought it over for a minute, then slowly she closed the door. I dropped my cigar into the tray.

I said, "The cops have an idea maybe Barney is responsible for Marie Stanton's death."

"I don't believe it. Barney couldn't kill anybody."

I shrugged. "Why do you suppose Barney did a disappearing act?"

"Because he's being hounded and they're scaring him out of his pants. You, Klinsky, the police. He doesn't know which way to turn. That's why he's disappeared. Not because he had anything to do with Marie Stanton."

"Then what makes you believe Barney is dead?"

She sat down, took her head in her hands, a gorgeous blonde head that could fit nicely on my shoulder. "I know

I'm not being very consistent, but I'm scared for him. Maybe he was made to disappear; Klinsky and his boys are experts at making concrete coffins. Or perhaps someone else . . . I don't know, Jim."

Her full lips were soft and delicious. I felt a glow creep over me. I wanted to take her in my arms. I wanted to take off her coat.

I said, "Make us some coffee, Penny, huh? You'll find the makings in the kitchen. I need a shave."

Anyway, I shaved, and after I washed up, I slipped into a pair of shorts and donned my robe. Later I could dress. Right now the smell of coffee was reminding me I was hungry.

She'd removed her coat and shoved up the long white sleeves of her V-necked blouse. From some corner of the closet, Penny'd dug out rye bread and a jar of jelly.

I had my first cup of coffee. As she refilled my cup, I said, "My dreams come true: a beautiful blonde babe sitting opposite me at the breakfast table. I mean it, Penny."

"What about Barney?"

"The hell with Barney."

"I didn't mean it that way. I came here to ask you to help me find Barney. We seem to be off on a trip to the moon."

I flung my napkin down. "Let him stay lost."

She turned her head away. "Don't start that again."

I pushed my chair away from the table and got to my feet. "Okay, we'll look for Barney and we'll find him. Then what?"

Her eyes searched my face. "What should I say, Jim? That after you find Barney, we can talk about us? That's what you want me to say, Jim, but it wouldn't be true, not really."

I looked at her sideways. "Maybe you forgot, but I heard you tell me how you were leaving Barney Malin, how you told him so. You didn't just make that up to fit the occasion?"

She shook her head. "It's true. I'm leaving Barney just as soon as I know he's all right. But as far as you and I are concerned . . . I'm sorry, Jim. I'm very mixed up. I don't know. Right now all I can think about is Barney. He's helped me, Jim. When I needed him most, he helped me. I

can't just run out on him now."

My voice sounded like gravel rolling against my eardrums. "Okay, where do I start looking?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he tell you he was going when he left the house?"

She rubbed wrinkles into her forehead with her right thumb and forefinger. "He said something about money. He had to get enough to pay off Klinsky. He had an idea he could keep the cops off his trail but that Klinsky had too many bloodhounds."

I thought that over for a while. I reached for my coffee cup and gulped down the last black ounce. "Where could Barney dig up enough money to pay off Klinsky? And don't tell me he has friends."

She bit into her lower lip with the effort of concentration. Finally she shook her head. "A couple thousand he might have been able to dig up, but not fifteen thousand dollars; not unless he returned to his bookie business. And, of course, that's out."

I stared at her. "Why? He did a big business. The daily take must have run into thousands of dollars. So, suppose he takes a gamble and opens up again? Not new customers, just the old reliable ones. Hell, with a little luck, he could make fifteen grand in a week or two. He ran his book in the Lerner Building on Broadway, didn't he?"

She nodded excitedly. "Wouldn't Barney be taking an awful gamble? If he gets into a mess with the cops . . ."

I laughed. "You think he'd rather tangle with Klinsky's guns? One week, that's all he'd need." She put the dishes into the sink and began to wipe the table with a square of cloth. "Funny thing," I said, "I can't buy that yarn. I get a better picture of Barney with a fistful of jewelry."

She flung the cloth at the dishes. "The same song, the same crazy tune. Can't you get your mind out of the rut? Jewelry and more jewelry! Why don't you try thinking maybe you got the setup all wrong? Maybe it was other guys with tattooed faces and four heads." She was shaking with anger. "Forget Barney, then maybe you can get some place."

I grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "You talk too

damn much." I found her lips and kissed her hard. She held herself rigid. I said, "Suppose we both forget Barney. Right now it's just you and me and the hell with the cop on the corner."

There was a frightened look in her blue eyes. "Let me go, Jim. You're hurting my arm."

I let her go and she backed against the metal cabinets. I hardly recognized my voice. "Now will you get the hell out of here so I can get dressed."

17.

STANLEY BENDER was as tall and thin and ugly as an Abraham Lincoln. In fact he could have passed for Lincoln; all he needed was the beard and the brains. But in the insurance business, luck is more important than brains, and a clean-shaven guy could be as lucky as a bearded one. He patted his secretary on the backside and sent her out of the office.

I went to the filing cabinet and in a minute I had the photos of the insured Donahue jewelry on his desk.

"You can sit in my chair," he said.

I found the photo I wanted, a blown-up picture of a platinum bracelet with fourteen chip diamonds running away from a heart-shaped topaz. I showed Stanley the photo. He glanced at it and lifted questioning eyes.

I said, "Same platinum bracelet, same-shaped topaz. Fourteen diamonds is my guess; I didn't get close enough to count. I'll bet my life a dame called Bella Parker wore it last night."

Interest, hot and excited, glazed his eyes. "It's about time some of that stuff began to show up." He kissed the photograph. "Come home to Papa, baby, and bring the rest of the family with you. This is fifteen hundred bucks of merchandise. Who is this dame?"

"The way I understand it, she's hostess in the gambling room in Klinsky's. One of the dames that makes a guy forget his losses."

He looked worried. "Klinsky's? That bastard mixed up in this? It won't be easy getting the stuff back from him if

he's had his mitts on it. Can you handle this Parker dame? Maybe I should send some of the boys along with you. You could ask her enough questions to wear her down."

I studied the other photographs. "For all I know she got the bracelet through legitimate channels. Otherwise, would she be dumb enough to wear it openly? I'll talk to her. Maybe we can do business."

I said, "Tell me about Donahue."

He played with a pack of cigarettes, threw it up in the air and caught it.

"In case we don't get back those jewels, we could ask Donahue if he wants to buy Bender's Insurance. Cheap. Eighty thousand bucks. We could then work for him. He's rich as they come."

I held up a photo. "I could never see this antique jewelry. Seven grand for a lousy necklace."

"Those are diamonds, boy, not glass."

"Junk," I said, "A lot of junk."

He laughed. "Guys have been killed for a lot less."

I got up. "I'm gonna visit this Parker dame. I assume you had no luck in the pawn shops."

He picked up the photographs and straightened them out. "You assume correctly. Not a piece, not a smell, except for those stinking cops. You'd think a private citizen had no business in a hock shop the way they ran our boys out."

18.

I LEANED on the buzzer, and from way inside the apartment I heard a muffled voice. I couldn't be sure, so I leaned on it again. A hefty woman waddled out of the opposite apartment and carefully locked her door, placed the key in her handbag and, after a quick look in my direction, sniffed and went down the carpeted hallway to the elevator.

The voice inside the apartment was louder now. I figured I'd been invited so I pushed the door open and went in. I stood in a small foyer just off the living room, a richly-furnished room with summer drapes to match the covers on the couch and the three club chairs. A television console door was open but the screen was blank. I lit a cigar and dropped

the match into the hand of a female decorating the lamp on the long mahogany table. Then I decided to take the match out of her hand and drop it into the chrome ash tray. I made myself comfortable in a club chair.

Bella Parker's voice was a little clearer now. It seemed to come from the bathroom. "My God, you almost took the buzzer off. What happened to your key?"

"It wouldn't fit," I said.

"What are you talking about? Say, who—?" There was a moment of dead silence. The bathroom door opened and Bella Parker came out stark naked, a towel in her hands. She ran the towel between her breasts and wiped the wet, glistening belly.

I said, "I'm sorry to bust in like this, if you'll pardon the expression."

She bent over to work the towel around her right thigh. "I don't believe that. Jim, isn't it? Sit down, Jim, and tell me what's on your mind?"

"If you'll get some clothes on we could go out for lunch. Or is it breakfast for you?"

She laughed gaily, and for a second I had the impression that Bella was slightly cracked. "Can you imagine! I should live to see the day a guy tells me to get clothes on. Guess I'm losing my sex appeal, or are you the one who's over the hill?"

I lay my cigar on the tray. "Some other time we can prove to each other how virile we really are. Right now, I'm hungry. You should patent that dance."

Holding a towel in each hand, she played them down her back while her body did a boogiewoogie. She must have had a lot of experience. I watched her, so fascinated I forgot about Penny; I even forgot Bender and our insurance company.

There was a sound at the door, and it opened. Kim Heller came in. He took one look at Bella and her towel, and me on the edge of the chair, and his jaw sagged. The door slammed closed behind him as he moved closer, hands clenched at his sides. I leaned back in my chair. The show was over and I was kind of sorry. Some day Bella Parker would have to do it over again just for me.

Heller cried, "For a second I thought I'd walked into the bawdy house on the second floor. What goes on?"

Bella touched her hair. "Don't be insulting, Kim. I was just showing Jim the dance I used to do at the Palace."

"Palace my eye. You quit burlesque four years ago. I got a good mind to send you back. Get dressed, damn it! Parading around like a two-dollar slut."

She stamped her bare foot. "You can't talk to me like that. I never was a two-dollar slut and you know it!"

"Shut up," he roared. "Breen, I thought you'd died in a car crash. Funny thing though, I wasn't surprised to see you just now. What you want?"

I crossed my legs. "I want to take Bella out for coffee."

He took a step toward me, fingers working at his side. "You got a lot of gall." He whirled. "Bella, you gonna get dressed or do I have to bang your ass off?"

Pouting, she said, "All right, all right. Did you ever!"

We watched her walk slowly and daintily out of the room. She was the cutest teaser I'd ever met. She sure knew her business, and she loved to practice.

Heller lit a cigarette. "What you want with Bella?"

I shrugged. "I want to ask her a few questions, and I can't think of a better place than in a big restaurant over a cup of coffee."

"I can think of a lot better places," he snapped. "What's Bella got to do with you and whatever you're working on?"

My eyes narrowed against the smoke. "I got the idea Bella might be able to give me some info on Sanders. Don't tell me she didn't see him around."

He threw his hands ceilingward. "So she saw him around. So what? I saw Sanders plenty of times, and I couldn't tell you a damn thing about the guy except he played lousy poker. He was more the *chemin de fer* type, if you ask me."

"Lousy or not, you didn't mind playing with him?"

He laughed. "I'm only a working man, and Klinsky is my boss. If we're short a houseman, I substitute. If we're short a bouncer, I sub again. If we're short a toilet bowl cleaner, I'm around for that too." He crushed the butt in the ash tray. "C'mon, Breen, the truth: What do you want with Bella?"

"I told you: information."

He waved his hand. "You told me nothing. You're working on the Donahue case. What's Sanders got to do with it?"

He stood legs astraddle, eyes cold and lusterless. He didn't move, waiting for an answer.

I smiled up at him. "Who said Sanders was connected with the Donahue case?"

He lit another cigarette. "You figure Sanders heisted the Donahue ice, so now you're trying to get a lead on the swag. Sanders is dead now. Somebody knocked him off and, for all you know, that somebody took the loot. So you're feeling around asking a lot of dumb questions, bothering people that had nothing to do with it."

"Wipe your lips, Heller, you're foaming."

He flung the cigarette so hard it bounced off the wall in a shower of sparks. "You bother me, feller; you bother me bad."

"That I know. You can tell me why."

"I just don't like you creeping up my back. Every place I move, you're there. First you come out to Klinsky's. You get Rex worked up about phony cards and he's suspicious of every guy that works in the place. He blows fire, and the working boys hop around like puppets. Then I come to my girl's house and you're there, studying art. You were gonna paint Bella's picture, weren't you?"

I broke my ash in the tray. "You're changing the subject, Heller. Let's forget Bella for a while. Let's concentrate on you. Let's figure out why you're so damned scared you blow soap bubbles everytime you look at me."

"Those ain't soap bubbles; it's spit I wanna splash in your ugly puss. You make me sick to my stomach."

"You're gonna be sicker, Heller, a lot sicker."

He blinked, his cheeks tinged with an angry red. "Get out of here, Breen. Take your stinking cigar and get out."

"How's the jewelry situation these days, Heller? Got any loose bracelets laying around you'd like to sell?"

His eyes were hot and alive now. "You trying to tie up that heist job with me?"

"Bella has a pretty bracelet she wore yesterday at Klinsky's place. You didn't give it to her?"

He looked puzzled. "Sure I gave it to her. You trying to tell me that's part of the Donahue loot?"

"You know it is. In fact, you know a lot about that Donahue heist job. With a little coaching you could give me the details."

He seemed stunned. "That lousy bracelet? I bought that piece of junk from Sanders."

I grinned. "You don't say? How much did it cost you?"

"Five hundred bucks."

"It's worth three times that."

Bella came out of the bedroom in her slip. "That's right," she said. "Fifteen hundred dollars."

He turned angrily on her. "What the hell do you know?"

She was hurt. "I had it appraised. You think you were gonna kid me with some crummy Woolworth junk?"

He clasped his head in his hands. "Get dressed, for God's sake. Stop walkin' around nude."

"Look at him," she said. "All of a sudden it bothers him."

"Shut up!" He fairly screamed. He tried to control himself. His hand shook as he touched her shoulder. "Bella, do me a favor. Shut up for five minutes and go get dressed. We'll settle our business without your advice."

After she'd flounced out of the room, he said nothing for a while. From out of the open bedroom came various sounds; a woman singing, a drawer slamming closed, a door opening on sighing hinges.

Heller's eyes moved up to mine. "I bought it, like I said. I paid five hundred dollars for that bracelet. I don't give a hoot what it's worth. That's what I paid, and I *still* think I overpaid." He glanced toward the bedroom. "For value received, I overpaid."

"I'd rather like to think you learned Sanders had a lot of jewelry in his possession. Maybe he told you; he probably needed help in disposing of the loot. I'd like to think you followed him home and beat the daylights out of him to make him disclose the hiding place of the jewelry. I'd like to think you killed him, and then turned the house upside down until you found the ice. That's what I'd like to think."

I didn't tell him that I believed Marie Stanton had walked in on the corpse and in her excitement, picked up the gun;

then, realizing what had happened, fled from the scene. Outside, she'd remembered the gun and put it into her bag to be disposed of later. Silly, sure. People don't pick up murder guns and put them in their handbags. Normal people don't. But when somebody is crazy with panic, when the brain is numb . . . who knows? It could have happened that way; it was a possibility.

He had a smug look on his bony face. "Sure, you'd like to frame me good. You and those cops. Look at me, Breen. Take a good look at this pan. Do I look that stupid? I've been around a lot and you won't find me sticking my neck out."

"If you're making a point, it's missed me completely."

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm talking about Bella and that bracelet. If I knocked off Sanders and took a lot of swag ice from him, you think I'd stick myself into the electric chair by letting Bella show off that junk?"

I said, "Logic is on your side. You got me thinking about it. If I come up with any good rebuttal evidence, I'll let you know."

Bella came out. She wore a blue print dress. In her hand she held the bracelet. She held it between her thumb forefinger as if it were some slimy reptile.

"I heard every word," she said, her voice hollow. "I see blood on it."

"You're nuts," Heller said.

"I don't want it," she said. "I couldn't sleep another wink if I wore this bracelet again."

Heller said, "You sleep like a horse, and a little blood wouldn't keep you awake. Here, give it—Hey!" I'd taken the bracelet out of her hand. "It's mine, Breen."

I slipped the bracelet into my pocket. "Don't be a sucker, pal. I'm saving you a rap for criminally buying stolen property—if your story is true. Anyway, we may need it for evidence just in case your story came out of a comic book. If I can prove you visited Sanders in his house that fact and this stolen bracelet will convict you of first degree murder."

His face seemed to swell as the blood rushed up to it. His mouth distorted with rage. "I paid for that bracelet and I want it, I bought it for five hundred bucks on the line."

"When did you buy it?"

"Saturday evening. Sanders lost some dough in a poker game that started Friday night. He wanted money. I told him to go out and print some because he wasn't getting any credit from Klinsky's. He left around one o'clock Saturday afternoon. The poker game went on without him. I was in the office, grabbing a nap, when one of the boys told me Sanders was back and wanted to see me. It was four-thirty. I let him wait until five while I grabbed some more snooze."

"Sanders had the bracelet and wanted a customer."

"Who's telling this story?"

"It sounds like a story, all right."

"It's the God's-honest-truth. I gave Sanders five hundred for that junk. He wanted a grand. He went back to the game. By six the game broke up."

"Sanders broke the house."

"He was still a lousy poker player. Only he didn't go broke this time. The game broke up too fast for him. He went home. Anyway, that's where he said he was going."

The heist had taken place at three. At four-thirty Sanders was back with a piece of loot. It was close figuring, but it could have happened that way. Sanders could have been outside the Donahue house waiting for Barney Malin to do the job. At three-ten, he could have been on his way to the city. He could have left Malin at the nearest cab and, after taking the bracelet, returned to the poker game. It could have happened, but Sanders wouldn't trust his mother with the rest of the loot. Besides, I couldn't see a wise guy like Barney Malin letting Sanders take a piece of jewelry to be sold, brazenly and openly—assuming Barney knew where Sanders was going with the ice. I couldn't see a guy so crazy about poker that, with eighty thousand in loot, he'd worry about rushing back to a game to win a couple of hundred dollars. But a gambler is a psycho.

I said, "Was that the only piece of jewelry he had?"

"I didn't frisk him. He had big shoes; they could've had phony bottoms. If I knew you'd be nosying around . . ."

Bella shifted her feet. "This is quite boring, if you ask me."

Heller cried, "Nobody's asking you. If there's no sex to it,

it's boring to you."

Bella turned her back to him. "Ignore him, Jim, and he'll go away. I'm ready. Where we going?"

I gave her my prettiest smile. "Take a rain check, honey. I got places to go."

She fumed. "You giving me a stand-up?"

Heller chortled. "Go on, throw your belly in his face. He got what he wanted, that lousy bracelet. Now, he says, go away."

I pinched her cheek. "Don't believe that hoodlum propaganda, honey. That date still stands. Tomorrow—" I stopped talking. Kim Heller was pointing a big black .45 at my chest.

A vein in his neck throbbed. "Hand over that damn bracelet. I paid for it and I'm keeping it. Nobody is gonna frame me with a murder rap, or any other kind of rap, just because I was dumb enough to buy swag stuff."

"If you had nothing to do with the robbery or murder, what are you afraid of?"

"A frame, that's what. And I don't like the idea of sweating it out under a light while six bulls push me around. Hand it over"—his finger tightened on the trigger—"or so help me, I'll empty this cannon right in your gut."

I took out the bracelet and flipped it from my right hand to my left. "The cops will want this for evidence. They'll sweat your brains out until you can tell them what you did with it."

"The hell with that. Toss it nice and easy, and no funny business."

I flipped it high. He didn't take his eye off me as he stepped back quickly and caught the bracelet off his chest.

I said, "When I want it, I'll know where to find you."

His gun hand shook. "I got a good mind to give it to you."

"No!" Bella had come to life. "Please, Kim, you'll get us all in a jam. I don't want any notoriety."

Kim cried, "Every place I go, every move I make, he's in my hair."

The knock on the door was loud, demanding. Kim seemed angry at the interruption. When the knock came again, he cried, "Bella!"

She opened the door and Rex Klinsky stood in the door-

way. "I want Kim to get to the club a little earlier tonight--" He stopped short, eyes wide as he saw the setup. He stepped into the door, closing the door behind him. "What the hell's going on?"

I said, "Heller's got a feeling he'd like to knock me off on account of I know too much about a crooked gambling game at your place."

Heller cried, "He's full of wind."

Klinsky's eyes narrowed with a mixture of hate and anger. "I'm sick of hearing about fixed games at my club." He sat down on the edge of a club chair. "Now talk and make it good before I order Kim to pull that trigger. Breen, I'm not kidding."

He didn't sound as if he were.

19.

I TOOK A CIGAR out of my pocket and lit it slowly and carefully.

I said, "Saturday afternoon, the day he got killed, Sanders played a little poker. How much did he lose?"

He didn't hesitate. "Eleven hundred dollars."

"How do you know it wasn't more, say a couple grand?"

There was a gleam of watchfulness in his eyes. "We play for chips only. My cashier who sells and buys the chips should know. The day you came sticking your puss around here, I got curious enough to ask him. Sanders bought eleven hundred dollars' worth."

I broke the cigar ash in the tray. Kim's gun was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen. He sat himself in a chair and lit a cigarette, and tossed the match toward the tray. It hit the desk and slid under the tray lip.

Klinsky said, "What the hell you stalling about, Breen?"

Kim Heller fished out the match from under the tray. He held the match in his left hand and ran his right thumb through the center. The sigh of relief came up from my stomach. I hadn't expected this. I'd hoped and prayed but never expected a Christmas present.

Heller said, "Sure as sin we're gonna get some cockeyed story that'll make no sense."

I smiled at him. "You should live so long, Kim. Wipe the sweat off your face and listen." His thumb cut the match into quarters, then eighths. I patted his shoulder. Listen to papa. Sanders, Klinsky says, lost eleven hundred in the poker game. Right?"

A touch of suspicion flickered in his eyes. "Don't get so damn friendly. Talk to Rex. Me, I *know* your story is crap."

I grinned. "How about that five hundred you gave him for the bracelet? He buy chips with that money too?"

"Of course."

"That shouldn't be hard to check. Sanders left, then came back around four-thirty, you told me. You bought the bracelet and he played some more cards. The cashier should remember if Sanders did buy \$500 worth of chips. Who played in the second game besides you and Sanders?"

He breathed heavily, resentment in the set of his jaw. "That's none of your business."

"The game couldn't have been a two-handed freeze-out?"

"It was a six-handed poker game, and to hell with you."

Rex looked at him oddly but said nothing.

I said, "Sanders dropped his original roll of eleven hundred dollars to the house in chips. His second roll, the five small bills he got for the bracelet, went into your pocket, in cash."

Heller's eyes flicked to Klinsky, back to me. "We played with chips all the way and on the level."

"That game was as phony as the deck of cards you slipped in on Sanders. But the sucker wasn't exactly a fool. He suspected the cards so he took the deck. There wasn't much you could do about it at the time. You didn't dare make an issue out of Sanders taking the deck, because if he started to holler, Klinsky might listen to him. Klinsky might examine the cards and get very sore at you. So, when you got the chance, you followed Sanders home. Maybe you tried to buy him off; I don't know. I do know you finally had to work on Sanders with a pair of brass knuckles to convince him to return the cards to you."

He laughed hoarsely. "You're talkin' through a big hole in your head."

Klinsky opened his mouth. "Knock it off. A gentleman is

talking."

Heller gasped. "You fallin' for that crap? You lettin' him talk it into you?"

"It don't sound like crap." He searched my face. "Not too much. Go on, Breen, what happened then?"

I relit my cigar. "Sanders was a very stubborn guy. He wouldn't give Heller the cards. Heller lost his head and put a couple slugs into his sucker."

His face shining with sweat, Hell jumped up, "You don't know what the hell you're talkin' about. I didn't kill anybody."

"You found the cards. You must have had quite a search. That house was in a mess when I saw it."

"I didn't search for anything."

"You mean Sanders weakened and gave you the deck?"

"I didn't say that. There *was* no deck."

"You were afraid Sanders might go running to Klinsky, so you had to kill him."

"Shut up!" He pounded the desk again and again. "You liar!"

"I found a phony card. Did Sanders pull a fast one and switch one card before you killed him?"

He cried out, "Rex, make him stop those damn lies."

I said, "Or, you searched the house, found the deck and, in your excitement, dropped them out of the container. You picked them up, losing one under the bed. Later, you counted the cards and found one missing. Or you guessed what had happened when I asked Rex for a deck and implied he ran a phony game."

Klinsky grunted. "I got a good rep." He glared at Heller. "Nobody is gonna ruin it either."

I said, "The card as evidence didn't mean a damn thing, only Kim couldn't figure that out." I touched the back of my head and it brought back memories. "It still hurts, Kim. You slugged me, swiped the card and substituted another eight of clubs for it."

It was quiet except for the sound of heavy breathing that came out of Heller's open mouth.

"No, Rex, no. Anybody can make up a story. Proof—where's his proof?"

Klinsky said, "You pulled that phony deck stunt once before, Kim. You got on your knees and pleaded like a dog for your miserable life. I let it go; I was in a good mood. Only I told you what would happen if you ever tried it again."

"Rex," he cried, "where's his goddam proof?"

I said, "In your fist, Kim. *You* got the proof." He opened his fingers slowly and stared at the split match. I said, "Pretty isn't it, Kim? Like a flower. Eight layers. I know a time you hit nine."

His lips quivered, opening and closing.

I said, "Detective McCarthy has one you made up in Sanders' flat the night you knocked him off. McCarthy would like to know who the artist is."

There was something desperate growing in his face. "It's a lie, a lousy lie. I didn't knock Sanders off."

Klinsky growled. "Breen makes out a pretty good case. If I was you, Kim, I'd get started on a road trip. I'd cut your little belly open but let McCarthy chase you around. You'll enjoy hiding in holes, ducking the daylight--"

He cried, "Don't let them frame me, Rex. This louse talks smooth but says nothing he couldn't make up. It's his word against mine."

I said, "And the landlady. Let's not skip Sanders' landlady."

"What's the landlady got to do with me?"

"Nothing, if she can't identify you. Everything, if she points the finger in your face and says you're the guy with the gray hat and blue coat," I lied. "She got a good look at the guy's pan; she watched him go upstairs. She heard Sanders admit him. If we take a trip down there, I'll bet she identifies you, Kim."

Klinsky's face muscles worked convulsively. "It's written all over his lousy crooked face. Get out of here, Kim. Get out and start traveling. Fifteen minutes after you leave, I'll hand Jim Breen the phone; he can call who he likes. Fifteen minutes you got . . ."

I stood up. "The hell with that. I got business with this guy and he's not running out on me. I'm not worried about McCarthy; let him break his own cases. I want jewelry, a lot

of hot jewelry."

Swearing savagely, Heller jumped to his feet, pulling out his black .45 in his fist.

"You and your damn jewelry got me into this mess. So I rooked Sanders, so what? Every guy walks into Rex's joint is screwed before he starts playing. Honest Rex Klinsky!" He spat on the desk. "This for you."

Rex Klinsky's face filled with blood. He pushed himself to his feet. "Start running, Kim. Run fast. But I'll catch up to you. A million miles away and I'll find you."

This was a good opportunity for a brave Humphrey Bogart to prove his courage by shoving the gun down Heller's throat, but this wasn't the movies. The guy was big and ugly, and the pores in my hide were wide enough without puncturing them with slugs.

Kim Heller was working himself into a fit. His gun hand shook, and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and under his eyes.

"That damn Sanders swiping the cards—that's what started this dog smelling around me. Rex, give me a break." He was beginning to whimper. "We can get rid of this shamus. Nobody'd look for me here." He stiffened. "But you wouldn't give anybody a break. It's me or you. I could knock you both off." His whole body shook as he pointed the gun in my direction.

I said, "You might beat the Sanders murder rap with a tight story. If I were a lawyer, I'd plead you guilty to justifiable homicide, self-defense. But knocking us both off will be a lot tougher rap to squirm out of."

His eyes were big white half dollars in his bony face. "You dumb bastard, can't you understand I never killed Sanders? Why the hell should I? Once I got the deck of cards, he could blow his top and it'd get him nothing but a cold."

"You beat the daylights out of him."

A crafty smile flickered across his face. "I offered him his money back for the cards. He became cute. He wanted ten grand or else he'd go to Rex Klinsky." His laugh was a croak. "I talked to him. He was a stubborn guy. So I banged him around a little, and he handed the deck over to me. The whole damn pack fell out of the container. While I was

picking them up, he ran for the bedroom window so I beat it."

"Minus a card?"

He laughed crazily. "Minus nothing. Course, I hadda bop you one to get back the missing eight of clubs, but it's a full deck I got in my room now."

"You didn't ransack the place?"

"For what?"

I shrugged. "Like you say, for what?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What's done is done. Right now I gotta protect myself. I gotta give it to you, Rex."

Klinsky leaned back in his chair. "My boys will find you out."

"Bet you a copper coffin they come in with me. Me and Puggy can run this business. Five cents cut on the dollar ain't bad. I got ideas on how we can make more."

Klinsky's voice was shrill and thin. "With phony cards, a phony wheel—everything phony."

The veins on Heller's neck stood out as he roared with laughter, the sweat rolling down his face, his gun hand shiny. "Screw the yokels, that's what the new motto is gonna be. Screw them good so they'll like it and come back for more." He turned to Bella. "Get our things, we're getting out of here soon as I give the morgue two fresh bodies."

Bella said, "You, brother, not me. I don't want cops on my tail."

He cursed her savagely and made a motion toward her with the gun. I picked up an ash tray and flung it in his direction. He lifted his hands to block the flying saucer. Before he could bring them down again, Klinsky's shiny .38 came out of the shoulder holster. The shots sounded as one, but whereas Heller's bullets chipped plaster off the wall, Klinsky's found its mark.

There was a surprised look on Heller's face. His gun hand dropped and a hole opened just above his left eye. It wasn't an especially big hole. It looked like a dark smudge with a reddish liquid running out of it. He collapsed in a heap. His lips moved, then stopped as he stared sightlessly at nothing.

Bella gasped, shook her head once, and then began to cry. Klinsky swore.

"Now I got explaining to do," he cried. "Where's the damn phone? I'll get a couple of the boys over to take Kim where he won't be found for a year. Stop the damn crying! You," he said to me, "hang around."

That was what he thought. I had no desire to be there when his boys came.

He moved to the corner of the room where the phone rested on the end table. He lay his revolver on the table and began to dial. Slowly I backed up and, as he began to bark into the mouthpiece, I yanked open the door and ran like hell.

Out in the street, I stopped running. Where to now? I had to find Barney. Only he could fit together the crazy pieces bouncing around in my head.

20.

I DIDN'T TAKE the elevator in the Lerner Building. I found the stairs and walked up the two flights. The door marked *Toys, Inc.* was in the corner, opposite a blank wall. I tried to push open the door. It didn't budge. I knocked. No answer. I knocked harder and rattled the knob. It was useless. I moved away from the door and stood against the wall.

A minute passed, then another. I took out a cigar, then put it back in my pocket. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. My watch said two-thirty. I heard a noise at the door, a click, and it opened. A young man around twenty came out and headed for the stairs. Before the door could close, I had my foot inside. I pushed and stepped inside. The platinum blonde picked herself off the floor, a buxom blonde with phony eyelashes. Without a word she went around the wooden railing to where a push button intercom lay on her desk. I grabbed her wrist.

"No signals, honey, or I'll have to knock you on your little fanny." A love story magazine lay open near the intercom. On top of the intercom sat a black leather handbag. Her brown eyes shifted to the closed door inside the rail and to the right of her.

I said, "Be good, blondie, and I'll be out of here in a few minutes. Start something, and you'll do a bit for maintaining a disorderly house."

"Where you get that stuff?" she cried, brown eyes wide with a mixture of anger and fear. "This ain't a joint."

I was the most amazed guy. "No! Shows you how wrong a guy can get. How many guys in there?"

She was troubled. "Three. I don't know what they do in there."

"They play potsy. Now you know. Barney Malin in there, too?"

"Barney Malin? I'm afraid I don't know their names. You see they hired me this morning--"

"Then for all you know, this *could* be a disorderly house."

She bristled. "Now, see here!"

"Shut up and open that door for me." She hesitated. I said, "I could take you down to the station house."

She said, "The door opens from the other side."

"Don't give me that. The guy that just went out; how does he get in again?"

"He knocks and they open it. Three knocks, a pause, then one more."

"And then somebody opens the door?"

She nodded, a little too quickly. I reached over and took her handbag. I waved down her protests. "Shut up and keep your voice down." I took out her wallet, found her name and address inside, dropped the wallet into the bag and flipped the bag in her direction.

She caught it as it slid down her left bust. "Find what you want?" An amused smile curled the red lips.

"Just your name and address, honey."

"I don't go out with cops."

"Stuck-up, aren't you? Now, honey, I'm gonna knock on the door like you said: three bangs, a pause, then more knuckles. If it works, I'll forget I ever saw you. If I get screwed up, I've got your address and I'll know where to pick you up."

I went inside the railing and up to the door. I raised my hand, my eyes still on her. She stood stiff, lips open, indecision in her manner.

I said, "Wish me luck, honey."

"Wait!" She opened the desk, bent over to fumble around inside, and came up with a key. "Better use this. I'm sorry I ever went back into this business. Trouble, trouble, all the time."

I took her arm. "Come with me, blondie, just to keep you out of mischief."

She pleaded. "You're not going to lock me up."

I shook my head. "I promise. I just don't want you using that telephone while I'm in there."

I fitted the key into the Yale lock and pushed open the door. Three men in shirt sleeves sat at a long rectangular table. They turned and froze. The telephone began to jangle. Nobody moved to answer it. The blonde stalked to the corner and sat down near the window.

I said, "I'm a friend of Barney Malin's."

A man groaned. "What cop isn't? One day in business and we get a pinch. Maybe there's something we can do."

I nodded. "Malin and I can talk business."

"He'd better," the man said. "Me, I'm finished, once and for all. Nobody is gonna talk me into taking a chance again."

A red-faced kid of around college age said, "I better get that dishwashing job back again. This is too rich for my blood."

The third man just sat there, grinning stupidly.

On the long table was an adding machine, rolls of tape bearing tabulations, a quantity of cards on which were printed New Jersey telephone numbers, lined sheets with penciled notations, racing forms and sports bulletins. Using the telephone numbers on the printed card, a bettor could call Newark; then the New York office would receive listings of the bets. It was their job to tabulate them, pay off winnings and collect on losings. It was a complete circle: New York bettor calls New Jersey; New Jersey informs New York; New York pays off. This was supposed to fool the cops. It usually did, provided they shelled out big taxes to these same cops to make them want to be fooled.

I asked the red-faced kid when they expected Barney Malin. He looked at the stupid looking man who said, "I should know? I give the boss orders? One hour, one minute,

tomorrow . . .”

Blondie said, “Mr. Malin will be back soon. He went out an hour ago and said he’d be back in an hour. One hour means one hour—”

It was good to meet a good-looking dame that had gone to school. I didn’t realize I was staring until I saw the warm color fill her cheeks.

I stepped back quickly as the door opened. Barney was the guy I wanted. Ten minutes was all I needed this time. I had a fair idea of the score. I needed verification. I needed my pal, Barney.

A broad-shouldered man with a crew haircut came in. I relaxed and spit dryly in disappointment. He stopped short when he saw me.

The red-faced kid said, “Say hello to the cop.”

The man gave me a brief, nervous smile. “I must have the wrong office.”

“Don’t let it throw you. Grab a chair and sit down.”

He let the door slam closed. “I just wanted to make a little bet. Honest to God, I’m only a bettor. You can’t lock up bettors.”

The man was well versed in the law.

I said, “Sit down. We can talk it over.”

He shoved his hands deep in his pockets. “One little bet and I get in a jam. A lousy five bucks on Sister’s Boy in the second at Suffolk.”

“Sister’s Boy? She’s been scratched—nervous breakdown. Will you sit down before I push you down?”

The red-faced kid said, “Might as well, Howie. He don’t believe you anyway. Where the hell is Malin?”

Howie looked surprised. “Isn’t he here yet? I left him on the corner ten minutes ago.”

I walked to the far end of the room and opened a door. It was the washroom. I glanced around. A tube of Colgate toothpaste lay on the medicine chest alongside a pink toothbrush. A turkish towel hung over the chrome shower curtain rod. I closed the door. Four pairs of eyes watched my every movement; only the blonde didn’t seem to care what I did. The second door opened into a small anteroom containing an Army cot. The mattress had no sheet. The olive drab blanket

dragged on the floor. In the corner stood a clothes closet.

I closed the door and approached Howie. He looked up at me and rolled his enormous shoulders.

I said, "You were with Malin this afternoon?"

He shrugged. "What's it to you?"

I reprimanded him. "Barney won't like it; you're not co-operating."

He said, "Barney always co-operated with you cops, and you know it. You must be a new cop; I never seen you before."

The red-faced kid said, "I don't even recognize the cop on my block. Changes, all the time changes."

I said, "Howie, concentrate on me. You hung around Malin this afternoon?"

He nodded. "I followed him around. He hadda see people." "Customers."

He pursed his lips. "Could be. I didn't get close enough to listen. You know, mister, I don't like your questions. You don't sound like a cop. Fact, I don't think you are a cop. Let's see your identification."

"I left the rubber hose in the station house."

He got more confident. "Let's see your badge. If you're a cop, you got a badge. Hey, fellers, this guy show you a badge?"

The stupid-looking man lost his grin. "No. And since when does a division cop work without a partner?"

Howie got up, hands on hips. "C'mon, cop, show it."

I growled, "Sit down, tough guy, before I knock you down."

He laughed, turned to the others. "I figured he was no cop. He's just trying to shake Barney down."

I pushed him so hard, he hit the chair and went back and over in a somersault. I said, "Now stay put and nobody'll get hurt. I'm not shaking anybody down. I just want to talk to Barney."

Howie came up slowly. He ran his wrist across his mouth. He said, "Maybe Barney don't wanna talk to you, mister."

I was about to answer him when I heard the key in the lock. I headed for the door. It opened and Barney Malin, dressed as if he'd spent his nights sleeping in a hotel instead

of in the crummy anteroom. He stood there, the door still open, his eyes on me. Realization came quickly.

"Jim Breen!" The color drained out of his face. "What the hell!" Suddenly he pushed the door in my direction and wheeled. I reached out, grabbed his collar, and jerked him to the floor. A strong arm entwined around my neck and yanked me back over a knee. I looked up into Howie's hot eyes. "I figured Barney didn't wanna talk to you," he cried.

I squirmed and tried to do a flip, but his grip was sure. My back was over his hip, and his arm grew tight around my neck. His breath was hot, panting. I stopped fighting him. He did not relax his grip. If anything, it seemed to get tighter. I gasped for air. Black spots appeared before my eyes.

His face came close to mine. His eyes were two black holes in a skull. I lashed up with my left fist, then my right. The black holes opened and closed, and I slipped to the floor. I rolled away, then came staggering to my feet. Breathing was a hot fire that seared my lungs. I couldn't swallow. But the black spots were gone, and Howie's face wasn't a skull any more. He came at me in a football tackle. His arms circled my waist. I brought my knee up and we rolled over. On the floor, he slammed his fist into my chest, then brought the fist up to my head. I crawled onto him and let loose a barrage of punches that stopped only when I couldn't lift my hands any more. I sat on him, breathing raggedly, too tired to get up.

His right eye was closing rapidly; his left eye was red and puffy. His flat, bloody nose looked as if it had run into a Mack truck. Finally I rolled off him and lay on my back for a half-minute. It was no use going after Barney Malin. By this time he was probably a mile away, and still going. I sat up and looked around. The place was deserted except for Howie and me. I pushed myself up from the floor and stood on rubber legs.

Howie was coming out of it. I went to the washroom, filled a glass with water and came back to pour the liquid into Howie's face. He sat up quickly, gasping. I helped him to a chair.

I said, "I want some information . . ."

He didn't object; he couldn't. With one eye completely

closed and the other closing, he was in no mood to make another fight out of it. He told me what I wanted to know.

He had accompanied Barney to certain people who had been Barney's customers before the new Federal tax had forced bookies to look for other occupations. Customers had made bets on various horses; two had refused to bet on horses but had been willing to lend Barney five hundred dollars. In all, Barney Malin had collected three thousand dollars in bets; one thousand had been borrowed.

Howie said, "Barney needed fifteen grand, he told me. But all he got was four, and he only had about three, so he was still kind of short."

"The three grand were for bets."

He laughed harshly. "Barney said he was gonna use the money for something else; he'd owe the winners whatever they won."

Evidently his life was safer in welshing on his customers than on Rex Klinsky. So Barney had about half of Klinsky's money. Where would he go to get the other half? Where could he go? Would he go to Klinsky and try to save his life by paying the seven thousand? He wouldn't take the chance, I decided. Maybe he'd send Penny?

I found a telephone book and dug out Barney's telephone number. I dialed three different times but all I got was a ring that said nobody was home.

21.

PENNY WASN'T glad to see me. In fact, she tried to slam the door in my face. My shoe stopped it from closing. I pushed my way inside. Penny turned her back on me and went for a cigarette. I took a walk around the room, went into the bedroom, opened up the closets for a look, came back to her.

She said, "You didn't look in the bathroom."

I said, "I had a crazy idea Barney was in the apartment. A dozen cops are around the building outside; I don't know how many more on the roof. I expected to find Barney had sneaked in. Shows you how wrong a guy can be."

She sucked on her cigarette. "For you, it's easy."

I sat down. "You look lonesome so I'll hang around a while."

"You're not my idea of company. So will you get out of here?"

I got up and took another turn around the room, stopping short near the couch. I said, "It wasn't many hours ago when, up in my apartment, you told me you were through with Barney Malin. You just wanted to know he was safe and sound; then you were leaving him."

She became busy crushing her cigarette in the tray. "That's what I said."

"You saw Barney; you know he's all right." Her head came up quickly. I said, "You did speak to Barney, didn't you?"

She locked her hands in front of her. "He called on the phone."

"He wouldn't have time to give you the details on what to do and where to meet him with the phone tapped; he wouldn't dare. And Barney is too smart not to know the phone is tapped. You met him in the street. I'd guess up near the Lerner Building."

She sat down abruptly and stared up at me with frightened eyes. "I went up there to see if I could contact somebody who could give me a lead on Barney's whereabouts. As the cab pulled up, Barney came running out."

"So you gave him a lift."

She said, "What should I have done, brought him back to you? Sure I gave him a lift, and I'd do it again. I don't care what you think he did."

"Which brings us back to what I was saying. Now that you found him safe and sound, you're leaving him, of course?"

She shrugged with her eyebrows. "Of course."

"That takes a load off my mind."

She smiled. "I'm glad. Now if you'll go—"

"Don't rush me, honey. There was something else I said about a minute ago. Will the stenographer please read the testimony? Breen: Malin wouldn't have time on the phone to tell you where to meet him."

She threw her head. "We talked about nothing. There

wasn't time."

I bent down, stuck my hand over the arm of the couch, picked up a valise and dropped it in the center of the room.

"Maybe you're going to a movie and this is your lunch."

Her hand shook as she reached for another cigarette. "So I'm taking a little trip. I'm sick and tired of hanging around here."

"Where you going, baby?"

"Far enough to get away from the smell of cops."

"Where and when do you meet Barney?"

"Barney?"

"Damn it, let's cut out the surprise. You're running off with Barney. Damn it, where is Barney?" I hollered.

She looked at me, frightened and pale. "I don't know where Barney is now. He told me he'd give me a ring. If I answered the phone and got no answer to my hello I was to meet him on 65th Street and Broadway. He'd be waiting in a car. He said he had some business to finish up, and that he'd be through by five-thirty. It's almost six-thirty now, and I'm worried."

I watched her face. "Barney went to get more money for your getaway." She looked away, but I'd caught the bare flicker that passed over her face. I said, "Where did he say he was going? That damn fool is flirting with a slab in the morgue."

"He didn't say."

"This is a matter of life and death, as they say in the movies."

She stared at me, blinking. "He didn't tell me, Jim. Honest to God, he didn't say. He said he didn't have enough cash but that he would get more, enough for him to live on for a while. That's all, so help me, God."

I pulled her close to me, kissed her quickly, and pushed her away. She cried out after me but I hurried out to the elevator. I hadn't been talking out of my hat. Barney's life depended on my speed. But, I was afraid that even if I had the ways and means, there was nothing I could do to help him.

My help would be too little and too late. Way back, when he'd sworn he hadn't heisted the Donahue jewelry, I should

have realized he was telling the truth. Only I was too stubborn . . .

Before the elevator could come up to the floor, Penny, a coat thrown around her shoulders, hurried out.

"I'm going with you," she said.

I shook my head. "I work alone; I'd like to wind this up alone."

She followed me into the elevator, pleading her case. McCarthy's stooges were across the street: one sitting in a parked sedan; the other in the alley between two buildings. I walked to the corner and hailed a cab. I gave the hackie the address, got inside, and started to slam the door. Penny had half her body inside. I lay a heavy hand on her shoulder and solemnly shook my head.

She smiled sweetly. "You did say there were policemen outside my apartment building, didn't you? If I let out a howl, they will come running. And it won't take the rubber hose for me to give them the address you just gave the cabbie."

I shrugged and shifted to make room for her. Hell, you can't fight City Hall, or a sharp-eared shrew.

22.

A TALL MAN with graying hair opened the door of the Donahue house. He looked tired, haggard. He stared at me, blinking twice, then shifted his eyes to Penny.

I said, "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Donahue."

He tried to lift his hand to his face but couldn't quite make it. "You may as well come in. We've had a little trouble."

I hurried past him into the living room. I saw the big feet sticking out from behind the couch in the center of the room. An end table lay on its side, the ash tray face down on the floor. Big feet—size thirteen shoes. Barney Malin's shoes. I heard a sound from behind me, and Penny rushed past, dropped to her knees, leaned over the body, shaking it, calling for it to get up and say something.

Mrs. Donahue, her face gray and lined, sat stiffly in a chair

at the window. Her hand trembled as she pushed back a piece of hair. She kept staring out the window even as Penny's sobs filled the room.

I squatted at Barney's side, took his hand and dropped it without looking for a pulse. There was nothing I could do for him. Not anymore.

I looked up at Penny. She was standing now, tear-stained eyes wide with some kind of horror as they looked over my shoulder. My head came around in a slow, half turn. Thomas Donahue held a gun in his right hand, the nose pointed at my head.

I got up slowly, my eyes on the cannon.

He said, "That man came in here like a madman, waving this gun, threatening, demanding all the cash we had. I caught him off guard. We struggled and the gun went off. It was unfortunate, but a man has the right to protect his family."

"That sounds logical. Tell me more."

"More? I'm sorry, that's the story." He looked down at the gun in his hand, as if not knowing what to do with it.

I stepped close and took it. He seemed relieved, a sound not unlike a sigh coming from his dry lips. It was a Colt .32, the same type of gun that had killed Frank Sanders.

Penny studied my face. "Barney never owned that gun."

I lay the gun near Barney. I said, "The police will want to check with ballistics. I assume you called the police, Mr. Donahue?"

He frowned. "I was just going to when you knocked."

I stared at him until he shifted his gaze. "This man's been dead about an hour. What were you doing in that time, taking his temperature?"

"I was so ill I didn't know what to do." He looked sick.

Mrs. Donahue said, "I'm afraid he had his hands full with me, Mr. Breen. I fainted and it took a while to revive me."

"An hour?"

"Please, Mr. Breen. Things are bad enough without you acting the policeman. Would you please make the necessary calls?"

I dialed the operator and was connected with police headquarters. I left word with homicide that Lieutenant McCarthy

was wanted at the Donahue's residence; Barney Malin, the man he was looking for was dead from a bullet wound.

When I hung up, Donahue went to his wife's side. She was sobbing into a handkerchief and he comforted her. It was a very touching scene. With a different setup I could have appreciated it. As it was, it just turned my stomach.

I said, "This man is Barney Malin, the same individual who robbed your wife and sister on Saturday. If he got your jewels, then what in hell would he be doing back here today?"

Donahue became tough. "I don't like your tone, Mr. Breen."

"You're going to hate all of me before I'm through. Barney wasn't crazy. There were a thousand houses and stores he could have heisted for more jewelry or cash than he could possibly find in here. Mrs. Donahue?" She took the handkerchief away from her face. I said, "Barney Malin never did steal your jewelry, did he?"

All the color drained out of her face. "Of course he did. This is the man. I recognize him as the one—"

"Frank Sanders got your jewelry, days, hours, weeks before the phony robbery. Sanders got them one piece at a time."

Donahue sat down abruptly in a club chair. His face twitched. "We are not claiming any insurance money. It was a mistake."

I laughed. "Sure it was a mistake: the phony heist, Frank Sanders' murder, Marie Stanton's murder—yes, murder—and now Barney Malin's murder. All one big sorry mistake. The police will be here soon. I'm making book McCarthy breaks the whole case a half-hour after you give him the same cockeyed reason for Malin's death. Mrs. Donahue, what did Frank Sanders have on you? Or did you give him presents for favors received?"

She held her head high. She didn't seem surprised, merely thoughtful. "Why would I give scum like that presents of jewelry?"

"You paid blackmail and dared not go to the police."

Tears filled her eyes and she found difficulty talking. "I loved Marie Stanton. I never had any family and to me Marie

was a sister. Frank Sanders blackmailed her for every dollar she possessed, and even when she had nothing left, he demanded more. Marie came to me and told the horrible story. She'd had an affair with this Sanders. Some pictures had been taken—filthy pictures of Marie and Sanders. He threatened to send copies to all her friends, to Mr. Donahue, to the newspapers . . . Forgive me, Mr. Breen, I don't usually sob like a child." Mrs. Donahue swallowed once or twice and continued with her story. "I gave Marie money. Then, when I had none left to give her, she begged me for a pair of earrings which Sanders could sell. The earrings would satisfy him. In fact, Sanders was going to leave town and never come back. That's what she thought. I pleaded with her to go to the police. She couldn't. I begged her to tell Mr. Donahue. He was her brother; he would help her. She refused, afraid. I told her I had no more ready cash and that I couldn't give her my jewelry. She cried, and I gave her the earrings. After the earrings, it was a necklace . . . then an emerald ring . . . on and on. . . ."

I chewed on a cigar "Then you had to account for the jewelry to Mr. Donahue."

She sat down on the edge of the couch and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "I knew Mr. Donahue would be home Saturday. I was frantic. I had to have the jewelry back. I appealed to Sanders. The robbery was his idea. That would stop Mr. Donahue's questions. I was a foolish woman but a desperate one. I agreed. Sanders hired this Malin person for three thousand dollars."

I lit my cigar. "So Malin took nothing but an empty jewelry box. What you could explain to me is this: If your sister-in-law was in on the deal, why did she put the finger on Malin with that tattoo description?"

"Marie was excited and blurted out the truth. Later, she was afraid to change the description lest the police become suspicious."

I spit out a piece of tobacco that stuck to my tongue. "I'd rather believe Marie Stanton didn't have the faintest idea there would be a planned robbery. I'd rather believe she unexpectedly walked into the house a few minutes before Malin's entrance. Somehow that sounds better."

She stared at me. "Why do you talk like that?"

"There's something about the sound of my voice that intrigues me. Let's get on to Sanders' murder."

Donahue looked sore. "Excusable murder or, at the worst, justifiable murder. When I got home Saturday afternoon, Mrs. Donahue told me the whole sordid story. My wife and I don't usually keep secrets from one another, and she just couldn't keep Marie's secret any longer. I went to Sanders' house and demanded the filthy pictures. We had a fight. He pulled out a revolver—that one there—and in the struggle the revolver was discharged. Sanders staggered toward the bedroom. I was afraid he had another gun hidden there. I kept firing the gun until there were no bullets left. Somehow Marie got her hands on the revolver and brought it home with her. I found it in her room. Then this Malin person charged into the house, his hand in his pocket. I had no way of knowing he did not have a gun. I tricked him into letting me go to the chest of drawers for money, got the gun and shot him."

"Then Barney Malin didn't come here with that revolver?"

His voice was harsh. "I'm sorry. I had to lie, hoping the sordid story would not have to be revealed, a dirty, filthy story that would run on the front page of every newspaper in the country. I was within my rights killing Sanders. Self-defense—"

I snapped. "Now if you'll explain how self-defense was the cause of Marie Stanton's death, you'll be batting a thousand percent."

His eyes opened in surprise. "Marie was a suicide. I'm positive of that. She heard I'd killed Sanders. Marie blamed herself, ate herself up inside. She brooded . . ."

"I'm beginning to get the idea. She was tired of living."

"All day she'd been moody. I was afraid for her. She ran out of the house, and that was the last time I saw my sister alive."

"How did Marie know you'd killed Sanders?"

"She went to visit Sanders and found him dead. She suspected I came there to reason with Sanders and had killed him."

"Your story would sound better if Marie had recognized the gun as belonging to you, guessed the truth, and had

taken it with her so the police couldn't trace it to her brother."

His face was yellow. "It's the truth, believe me."

"It doesn't make a bit of difference what I believe. It's the police you'll have to convince. And that glib account of your activities from the time your plane landed until Sanders was killed doesn't fit. I'm sorry, Mr. Donahue, you just didn't have to time to come here from LaGuardia airport, listen to Mrs. Donahue's saga, travel to Sanders' apartment and do a wrestling act."

I hardly recognized his voice. "You haven't believed a word I've said."

"I believed practically all of it, except a couple details. One: why Sanders, Marie Stanton and Malin were murdered." I looked at Mrs. Donahue. "Two: who actually committed the murders, all three of them? I mean you, Mrs. Donahue—you killed Sanders, Marie Stanton, and now Malin."

She lifted her head and we stared at each other.

"No," Donahue cried. "It was I."

I found I'd chewed my cigar almost to the middle. I dropped the shreds into the ash tray.

"If you had killed Malin, Mr. Donahue, you would have called the police within ten minutes. Mrs. Donahue killed him. Only she couldn't pack off the corpse and dump it into the river; Malin was a lot heavier than Marie Stanton. So Mrs. Donahue waited for you to come home. She needed your counsel and your help. She was desperate. And for the first time, you learned the whole stinking story. For the first time you learned Frank Sanders, your sister's lover, had, if I may use the term loosely, seduced your wife."

Mrs. Donahue pounded her fist on the chair arm. "I loved my husband; I still do."

I stood over her and she winced as I spoke. "One hour, one foolish crazy hour. That's all Sanders needed and he had you in his hip pocket. How he got his pictures, I don't know. For a ten-dollar bill he could hire somebody to stick a good camera inside your window and snap away."

Donahue's eyes were glazed. Penny moved to my side and stood quietly, her eyes on Mrs. Donahue's bowed head. Penny's hands were clenched at her sides, her eyes were

vicious. She seemed ready to pounce on Mrs. Donahue the moment she confessed to Barney Malin's murder. I squeezed Penny's arm. Her eyes moved up to mine. Slowly the fire died out. Hot tears overflowed. She turned away.

I said to Mrs. Donahue, "Sanders was an expert at blackmail. He sucked money out of you, and when you ran short settled for pieces of jewelry. Then, when you learned Mr. Donahue was coming home, you became frantic. Sanders was a nice guy; he had the perfect solution: a phony robbery. Now you didn't have to explain to your husband about the missing jewelry. It must have seemed a perfect solution, but Sanders was a smart cookie. Now he had you on two counts: the pictures and a phony heist job—notoriety plus prison."

I looked for another cigar, but there were none left. I got a cigarette from the box on the table, stuck it between my lips and forgot to light it.

I said, "That afternoon Sanders had some rotten luck in a poker game. He needed money, so he called the Bank of Donahue, Mrs. Donahue treasurer. But you had no money. It was Saturday, and even if you had any money in the bank, they wouldn't open the doors for you. He must have threatened you very much to have you go to his home that evening, a loaded persuader in your handbag. Perhaps you talked to him; I don't know. Sanders must have been in a pretty lousy humor; he'd just been roughed up by a good friend of his. Anyway, he wouldn't listen to reason so you killed him."

She shuddered. Donahue, trembling as if he had a chill, slipped an arm around her bent shoulders. She shrugged him off in an annoyed gesture. He moved away, looking hurt and sheepish.

I said, "Tell me, Mrs. Donahue, did you send Marie to recover the murder gun when you got home; then realized you'd left something traceable in Sanders' flat? Or did Marie go visiting her boy friend and walk in on a corpse? Recognizing the revolver, and wishing to protect her brother's reputation and sister-in-law's life, she'd naturally take it with her."

It was quiet in the room except for Donahue's hoarse

breathing. Seconds ticked off a minute. The silence was a hammer banging against a brass gong.

Finally she looked up at a spot over my head. Her eyes were big and luminous. "Poor Marie," she said. "She couldn't keep our secret. She tried so desperately to phone you . . . I had to quiet her. She was so good. The gun was so big . . . Tom's revolver. Frank should have listened to me. Tom, it isn't as if I didn't love you. I do, I do. Now more than ever. Poor Tom, I have hurt you so much. One mistake, one silly mistake . . ."

She stopped talking and sat there and rocked. Donahue gave an anguished sob. He dug his long bony fingers into his face and cried like a baby. Mrs. Donahue looked up at him with the blank, impersonal stare of a stranger.

She said, "Marie got the revolver for me. Poor Marie, she hated him, too. I came home, and the man from the insurance company was here. I told Marie about Sanders. She found the pictures and negatives. I searched and I found nothing. Marie found them. She knew the house better than I." Her laugh sounded like the cackle of a demented drunk.

I said, "Malin tried to shake you down for getaway money and died for it."

She cried, "Ten thousand dollars or he'd call the police. He sounded so crazy over the telephone. Ten thousand dollars or he'd tell the police how I'd conspired in a false robbery."

My mouth was dry and full of feathers. "So you invited him over and killed him, too."

Her head came up, high and proud. Tears shone wetly on her cheeks. "He came of his own free will . . ."

Donahue grasped my hand. "She doesn't know what she is saying. Look at her. The strain and aggravation has robbed her of her senses. I killed Sanders, Marie and Malin. Don't you see, Breen? It must be I. My wife is a fine person . . ."

I laughed harshly. "I suppose every murderer loves his mother."

"I did it," he screamed in my ear. "I, Thomas Donahue, swear it. I will tell the police it was I. We'll deny everything else."

I shook my head sadly, "Even if nothing else could be

proven, the police would pin Barney Malin's death on Mrs. Donahue. The paraffin test would show definitely who fired that .32 Colt."

I went on, "Just one thing bothers me. Sanders got the jewelry as a gift, sort of. He had nothing to fear in disposing of the trinkets. The logical place is a pawnshop, yet I never did get to see more than one piece."

Mrs. Donahue's smile was very crooked. "Once, in a boastful mood, he told me how he didn't use pawnshops because they paid so little. He was too smart to 'get rooked,' as he put it. He sold the jewelry to individual gamblers, who paid a better price. A man who wins a lot of money, Sanders explained, doesn't mind spending a few dollars more to buy a present for his wife or sweetheart. Did you know that, Mr. Breen?"

I said, "Live and learn."

Abruptly Mrs. Donahue moved out of her chair and swept up the revolver. She looked at us, first me, then Penny, then her husband. The gun trembled in her fist. She stuck the nozzle into her mouth. Penny screamed, turned away. Donahue moaned. The gun jumped even before the noise filled the room. She stood there for a second, blood streaming out of her mouth, the gun falling to the floor. She fell in sections: first her knees, then her elbows, then she sprawled over the floor. She lay face up, an ugly, bloody sight.

Shaking her head wildly, Penny rushed to me, sobbed in my shoulder. I patted Penny's shoulder and steered her to a window.

Donahue followed us, yelling like a madman. "You could have stopped her. You were close enough to stop her. Why did you let her kill herself? Why?"

I didn't answer him. Maybe I was close enough to knock the gun out of her hand. Maybe I wasn't. I don't know. All I know is if that's the way she wanted to die, who was I to say differently. Hell, I wasn't God.

The sudden loud knock on the door startled me. The local precinct had sent its delegation.